

The Demise of the Gaucho and the Rise of Equestrian Sport in Argentina*

Richard W. Slatta
Associate Professor of History
North Carolina State University

Gauchos, migratory ranch hands and wild cattle hunters of the Argentine pampas or plains, developed as an identifiable social group with a distinctive equestrian subculture during the eighteenth century. The early gaucho killed wild cattle (often illegally) for food and for their hides, sold for export to Europe. Gauchos lived to ride, and, not surprisingly, many of their principal forms of recreation involved equestrian contests. Using Allen Guttman's typology, we find that gauchos engaged in games (organized forms of play) and contests (competitive games). They also enjoyed participating in individual exhibitions of horsemanship and courage.¹

The gaucho's traditional equestrian contests represented one vital expression of his freedom and autonomy. But Argentina's elite leadership wished to supplant the gaucho and his ways with civilized European immigrants and customs. Domingo F. Sarmiento made the classic statement of this conflict when he depicted Argentine history as a struggle between urban, European "civilization" and the gaucho's rural "barbarism." Indeed, much of the sociopolitical conflict of nineteenth-century Latin America came from the opposition of the rural masses to elite imposition of a new cultural and economic order.²

During the nineteenth century, the Argentine ruling elite successfully circumscribed the gaucho's way of life. His means of livelihood, his geographical mobility, even his dress and diet, changed by order of the landed elite. The elite eliminated many traditional practices, such as ostrich hunting, altered others, and added foreign imports, such as polo. In this fashion, the nation's moderniz-

* The author wishes to thank William H. Beezley, Ray Boylston, Joseph P. Hobbs and Mary Lou LeCompte for assistance with this essay. A fellowship from the Tinker Foundation facilitated completion of this research. A preliminary version of the paper was presented at the Eleventh Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History, Mont Alto, PA, May 30, 1983.

1. See the distinctions between play, contests, games, and sports in Allen Guttman, *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports* (New York, 1978), pp. 3-5, 7.9. On the early history of the gaucho, see Madaline Wallis Nichols, *The Gaucho: Wild Horse Hunter, Cawlyrmon. Ideal of Romance*, (1942: rep., New York, 1968); and Ricardo Rodriguez Molas, *Historia social del gaucho* (Buenos Aires, 1968).

2. Domingo F. Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentine Republic in the Days of the Tyrants; Or, Civilization and Barbarism*, trans. Mrs. Horace Mann (1868: rep., New York, 1971); E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1980).

ing leadership expunged vestiges of what they considered an uncivilized past and moved the nation toward a modern future. The suppression of gaucho games and contests and their replacement by modern, organized equestrian sports reflects the larger sociopolitical forces of domination and repression that characterized nineteenth-century Argentina.³

The rise of organized equestrian sport in Argentina followed the demise of the gaucho and of his traditional contests and pastimes by the 1880s. In place of the gaucho and his rugged, violent contests arose organized, "civilized" spectator sports, including polo and rodeo. These alterations and impositions pushed aside elements of Argentina's folk past in favor of the European values and practices favored by the elite.

The historical change from gaucho participant contests to spectator sport conforms to the "conflict-coercion" perspective on the rise of organized sport. According to this view, elite imposition of organized sport is an example of their exercise of ideological hegemony over the masses. This elite vs. mass conflict represents a major social force that shapes sport and other cultural elements of some societies. The exercise of power over the masses by a ruling elite is as clearly shown in the areas of popular culture, such as sport, as it is in the areas of law or the allocation of economic resources and rewards.⁴

For Argentina, an elite battle to impose their "civilization" over the "barbarism" of gauchos and Indians forms a central motif for most of the nineteenth century. The elite effectively utilized the law, control of economic resources, and cultural hegemony to consolidate their class interests at the expense of the rural lower classes. Put another way, the suppression of gaucho contests and the establishment of modern equestrian spectator sports was part of the ruling elite's sweeping exercise of political and cultural hegemony over the nation. One reason that the conflict-coercion model works so well for Argentine history is that the elite-mass conflict was so clearly and completely delineated. Elements of race, class, culture, and geography deeply divided the white, Europeanized urban elite from the mestizo rural masses of the pampa.⁵

The gaucho subculture evolved from a blending of the Spanish heritage of the conquistadores and pre-existing Indian cultures. In the case of the similar gauchos of neighboring Brazil, the mix was one of Portuguese explorers and indigenous societies. The Hispanic element is easily identified in many attributes, equipment, and practices of the gauchos that appear elsewhere in the

3. On the repression and decline of the gaucho in the nineteenth century, see Richard W. Slatta. *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier* (Lincoln, 1983).

4. For an explication of the conflict perspective and on the concept of cultural hegemony, see Richard S. Gruneau, "Freedom and Constraint: The Paradoxes of Play, Games, and Sports," *Journal of Sport History* 7 (Winter 1980):73; idem, "Sport, Social Differentiation, and Social Inequality," in *Sport and Social Order*, ed. Donald W. Ball and John W. Loy (Reading, MA, 1975), pp. 134-137, 170; Richard S. Gruneau. *Class, Sports, and Social Development* (Amherst, 1983), pp. 69-71, 89, 170; John Hargreaves, "Sport and Hegemony: Some Theoretical Problems," in *Sport, Culture, and the Modern State*, ed. Hart Cantelon and Richard Gruneau, (Toronto, 1982), pp. 114-135; T. J. Jackson Lears. "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," *American Historical Review* 90 (June 1985), 567-593.

5. On the application of the conflict perspective from criminological theory to elite legal repression of the gaucho, see Richard W. Slatta. "Rural Criminality and Social Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires Province," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 60 (August 1980), 450-472.

Americas where the Spanish colonized. Work routines during roundup and branding season, the use of the lasso, and similar equestrian contests all link gauchos with their northern cousins in Mexico. From Mexico, equestrian practices were transferred into the American Southwest. The “all-American sport” of rodeo bears a strong Hispanic stamp.⁶

Most of the gaucho’s contests were duels or challenges to another man’s skill, strength, courage, and pride. As Peter C. McIntosh has noted, combative sports, wherein competitors seek to better an opponent directly or with special equipment, are common in many cultures. But in Argentina, machismo heightened the conflict and struggle for domination that suffused gaucho life. Even gaucho folksongs included a competitive element. Two participants would trade musical barbs and witticisms in the form of a singing duel or *payada*. Thus the combative violence that underlay the gaucho’s folk culture extended to his recreation as well. His equestrian practices, like other forms of folk sport identified by Eric Dunning, exhibited relatively high levels of open violence.⁷

Günther Lüschen observed that “cultures with a preference for competition are often, as those of the American Indians, engaged in games of chance as well.” Highly competitive gauchos conformed to this view. As inveterate gamblers, gauchos bet on the outcome of any activity from horseraces to cockfights and card games. Most Sundays found gauchos gathered at the *pulpería*, a combination general store and country tavern, to drink, play cards, duel with long, sword-like knives (*facones*), race horses, and gamble.⁸

One British diplomat described the gaucho life in unsympathetic terms during the 1860s:

This gambling leads, of course, to idleness, which may be assumed as the inevitable cause of vice and dissipation. Amongst the class of Gauchos, devoted to this kind of existence-and of whom I regret to say we have no small number-there is in truth little more of life, than smoking paper cigarritas-sucking from a mate cup-riding about from pulpería to pulpería-gambling and drinking gin or caña-with now and then an incident of the knife.⁹

Spanish riders brought many equestrian attitudes, practices, and equipment from Iberia to the Rio de la Plata. The gaucho exhibited his manliness, bravery, skills, and domination through many daring, dangerous equestrian pursuits. He also honed survival skills necessary to live on the vast Argentine plains frontier. Whether in often deadly knife fights over the fall of cards at the pulpería, in singing duels between two guitar-strumming contestants, or in equestrian

6. Mary Lou Le Compte, “The Hispanic Influence on the History of Rodeo, 1823-1922,” *Journal of Sport History?* 12 (Spring 1985): 21-38; Slatta, “Cowboys and Gauchos,” *Américas* 33 (Mar. 1981): 3-8; and Slatta, “Cowboys, Gauchos, and Llaneros,” *Persimmon Hill* 12:4 (1983): 8-23.

7. Peter C. McIntosh, “Theories of Why and How,” in *Sport in the Sociocultural Proress.* ed. Marie Hart. 2d ed. (Dubuque, IA. 1976), pp. 12-13; Sarmiento, *Life in the Argentine Republic.* pp. 41-45; Eric Dunning, “Social Bonding and Violence in Sport: A Theoretical-Empirical Analysis,” in *Sports Violence.* ed. Jeffrey H. Goldstein (New York, 1983), p. 137.

8. Günther Lüschen, “Sociology of Sport and the Cross-Cultural Analysis of Sport and Games,” in *The Cross-Cultural Analysis of Sport and Games.* ed. Günther Lüschen (Champaign, IL, 1970), p. 7; Slatta, “Pulperías and Contraband Capitalism in Nineteenth-Century Buenos Aires Province,” *The Americas* 38 (January 1982): 347-362.

9. Thomas Joseph Hutchinson, *The Paraná* (London, 1868), p. 92

contests of courage and horsemanship, gauchos pugnaciously showed the intransigent, uncompromising, combative spirit.¹⁰

Foreigner visitors and the ruling elite looked with disfavor on the gaucho's life and habits. To the foreign or elite eye, his backwardness and violence held back the nation politically and socially. But it is worth remembering that many of the same "vices" afflicted the gentry of the American South. There social critics berated the elite's excessive fondness for horseracing, cockfighting, gambling, and drinking. But the sociopolitical contexts of the South and Argentina make the situations very different. In the Old South, the gentry largely monopolized the leisurely activities of hunting, horse racing, and cock fights. As Benjamin Rader observed, the gentry "always sought to restrict participation to members of their own class." In contrast, these were despised lower class pursuits among gauchos on the Argentine pampa. In the North American case, the elite exercised its power to limit participation in such contests. In the Argentine case, the elite labored mightily to eliminate the same practices.¹¹

Gauchos favored a number of vigorous, competitive, often dangerous pastimes. Horse races on the pampa involved strength and courage in both man and beast as much as speed. One race variant, called "crowding horses," placed mounted gauchos close together side by side. The two riders sharply spurred their animals and struggled to crowd or push the other in a specified direction or toward a marked point. In another version, two riders galloped down a narrow track and tried to push the other's mount off the track as they raced.¹² George A. Peabody, a Massachusetts sportsman on a hunt in South America, watched such a race in 1859:

The track is of a certain width, & if one of the horses is able to crowd the other off the acknowledged track, he wins the race: they accordingly run down the course, each horse pushing with all his might, & it is frequently not the fastest, but the best trained and strongest horse that wins.¹³

Several other contests required great strength in the gaucho's mount (which he referred to as his *pingo*). In the *cinchada*, two horses were fastened together tail-to-tail with stout rawhide lassos tied to the saddles. The rider who could pull the other backward past a mark won this equestrian tug-of-war. This contest grew out of the need for mounts strong enough to pull against a wild, lassoed steer. Many gaucho equestrian contests and practices grew from exhibitions related to ranch work skills. More dangerous and macho than the *cinchada* was *pechando* or "breasting." Two mounted gauchos faced each other over a

10. For nineteenth-century evaluations of the gaucho character, see Slatta, *Gauchos*, pp. 9-16.

11. Robert J. Higgs, *Sports: A Reference Guide* (Westport, 1982), p. 17; John A. Lucas and Ronald A. Smith, *Saga of American Sport* (Philadelphia, 1978), pp. 29-30, 93; Benjamin Rader, *American Sports: From the Age of Folk Games to the Age of Spectators* (Englewood Cliffs, 1983), p. 19.

12. Thomas J. Hutchinson, *The Paraná*, p. 91; Nathaniel Holmes Bishop, *The Pampas and the Andes: A Thousand Miles' Walk Across South America*, 11th ed. (Boston, 1883), p. 93; Wilfred Latham, *The States of the River Plate*, 2d ed. rev., (London: 1868), pp. 56-59.

13. Quote from George A. Peabody, *South American Journals, 1858-1859*, ed. John Charles Phillips (Salem, MA, 1937), p. 128.

distance of up to 220 yards. At a signal, they galloped at top speed directly toward one another. The concussion of the head-on crash usually tumbled one or both riders (and often their mounts) to the ground. Recovering and remounting, the combatants quickly charged again. The contest continued until a gaucho or horse was too exhausted or badly injured to charge again. Pechando provided an opportunity for a gaucho to exhibit his courage and indifference to death or injury.¹⁴

Mexican horsemen practiced a type of dangerous combat similar to breast-riding. Samuel C. Reid Jr. described similar events during the fiesta of San Juan in Mexico in the mid-nineteenth century:

Single horsemen sometimes meet in full career, and as it is disgraceful to give the road on such occasions, they ride directly upon one another. Occasionally large rival parties meet in the narrow streets, and then a scene of wild confusion ensues. Like madmen, they yell and rush together; and when the horses are not overthrown by the shock, they grasp each other by the neck or waist, and attempt to drag their antagonist from the saddle to the ground.¹⁵

In the popular mind, a horseman usually shows special affection for his mount. Contrary to this view, the gaucho routinely maltreated his horse. If one was injured or even killed in a drunken contest, the rider would simply abandon him (mares were never ridden) and fetch a fresh mount. The sentimental bond that putatively formed between cowboy and horse in the American West did not develop on the pampa. In Argentina, vast herds of wild horses roamed the pampas during the eighteenth century, and a rider could quickly and easily enlarge his herd or *tropilla* with the toss of a lasso. Owing to their great abundance, horses cost next to nothing until the mid-nineteenth century. Even the humblest gaucho maintained a string of perhaps a dozen animals.¹⁶

A North American visitor to the pampa in the mid-nineteenth century rebuked a gaucho for such cruelty to horses. The gaucho replied laughingly, "Why do you pity him? He is worth but three dollars." Gauchos wasted little time in gentling these disposable mounts and controlled their half-wild horses with large, vicious spurs. A horse that could not withstand the quick, brutal taming process, or such strenuous contests as breast-riding, represented a risk to the gaucho rider whose life depended on a strong mount and his own skills and reflexes.¹⁷

During the nineteenth century, the Argentine elite began to object to the gaucho's mistreatment of horses. With the disappearance of the once vast herds of wild livestock, and the importation of more expensive, pure-blooded stock from Europe, the ranching elite clamored for an end to the gaucho's abuse of mounts. As with other gaucho practices, the elite succeeded in replacing the

14. Hutchinson, *The Paraná*, pp. 91-92; Bishop, *The Pampas and the Andes*, p. 93; Latham, *The States*, p. 59.

15. Samuel C. Reid, Jr., *The Scouting Expeditions of McCulloch's Texas Rangers* (Philadelphia, 1847), pp. 58-59. See LeCompte, "Hispanic Influence," for other Mexican equestrian games.

16. Sir Francis Bond Head, *Rough Notes taken during some Rapid Journeys across the Pampas and among the Andes* (London, 1826), p. 47.

17. Bishop, *The Pampas and the Andes*, p. 92.

hardy, violent methods of the *domador* (gaucho horsebreaker) with gentler, European-style handling. Like other elements of ranch work and life, horse taming methods became modernized.¹⁸

Competitive gauchos liked the direct head-to-head competition of racing, the *cinchada*, and *pechando*. But other exhibitions permitted an individual to show off his equestrian prowess. Gauchos placed a bar across a corral gate just above a horse's head. As a participant galloped up to the bar, he would jump out of the saddle, over the bar, and land on his mount's back on the other side. Obviously, timing, coordination, and strength spelled the difference between a spectacular leap and a dusty fall. In a variant, called the *maroma*, a bar was placed high above a corral gate. A gaucho stood on top of the bar and leaped onto the back of a wild horse or steer as it raced underneath out of the corral. The rider would stay with the wild horse until the animal was exhausted or tamed. A steer might be ridden about for awhile and then dispatched with a knife thrust into the throat. Gauchos also liked to gallop across the pampa, dropping one-by-one the pieces of the multi-layered saddle (*recado*) to the ground. Retracing his path, a rider would gallop at top speed, snatch each layer, and reassemble the saddle as he rode.¹⁹

Perhaps the most dangerous (and therefore most highly esteemed) individual exhibition was the *pialar*. The word means to lasso an animal by the legs, and that is exactly what happened. A single horseman galloped down a gauntlet of gauchos who all twirled lassos. As the rider sped past, the men in the gauntlet lassoed his horse's legs and threw the animal abruptly to the ground. The gaucho sought to land on his feet after the tumble, with the horse's reins still in hand. This activity, like many others, grew out of skills necessary to survival on the vast, solitary plains of Argentina. The pampa was honey-combed with animal burrows that frequently tripped even the most sure-footed mount. A solitary gaucho, who lost his mount on the frontier, stood little chance of survival. This was another reason to maintain a *tropilla* or herd of spare mounts.²⁰

Eleanor Metheny has noted the symbolic significance of sport as a ritualized situation that resembles "the actions men perform within their ongoing attempts to survive within the universe." Gaucho equestrian practices, like the *pialar*, often literally replicated real life problems and challenges, and the consequences were also very real—including serious injury or death for man and beast. Once organized spectator sport supplanted these daring exhibitions, the nexus with the real world and real consequences largely disappeared.*

In many ways, the gaucho's penchant for violence and excess gambling and drinking resemble the American cowboy. But the two equestrian types differ in one fundamental way. The gaucho's absolute aversion to being on foot set him

18. Carlos Lemee. *El esranciero*. 2d ed. (Buenos Aires. 1888). pp. 305-309.

19. Bishop. *The Pampas and the Andes*, p. 94; Hutchinson. *The Paraná*. pp. 97-98.

20. Thomas Joseph Hutchinson, *Buenos Aires and Argentine Gleanings* (London, 1865). pp. 51-52; Hutchinson. *The Paraná*, p. 98; Ysabel F. Rennie. *The Argentine Republic* (New York, 1945), p. II.

21. Quote from Eleanor Metheny. "Symbolic Forms of Movement: The Olympic Games," in Hart, ed., *Sport in the Sociocultural Process*. p. 79.

apart from the American cowboy. The latter also preferred to remain on horseback, but would on occasion engage in footraces—something no gaucho would ever do. Cowhands from different ranches might hold a foot race. These contests involved strategy as much as speed because the course would be littered with sagebrush, rabbit holes, ravines, and animal skeletons. Cowboys from the host ranch, more familiar with the rugged terrain, usually won. And bets always rode on the ranch favorites. Other contests involving strength and speed, popular on the American frontier, likewise did not appear on the Argentine pampa. The strenuous nineteenth-century jumping contests (including the high jump, broad jump, and hop, step, and jump) held no appeal to the single-mindedly equestrian gaucho.*

An additional physiological factor also discouraged the gaucho from running. His legs became badly bowed from a lifetime in the saddle. And his big toes became enlarged and deformed into talon-like claws from clutching small wooden stirrups. Thus gauchos could often walk only with great difficulty, and running was completely out of the question. The only contest afoot that appealed to the gaucho was the knife duel.²³

Hunting, a related form of gaucho recreation as well as an important source of income, also represented a needed survival skill. Gauchos stalked wild cattle and horses for their hides, and rheas (ostriches of the pampa) for their feathers, prized in European fashion markets. A favorite weapon well adapted to the flat, grassy plains was the bolas or *boleadoras* which the gaucho acquired from the pampean Indians who preceded him. Bolas, called *las tres Marías* (the three Marys) by gauchos, consisted of two or more commonly three stout rawhide thongs of up to ten or twelve feet in length. The thongs were bound together at one end and tipped with leather-covered stones or metal balls at the other. The balls varied in size according to the size of the animal being hunted. This weapon proved its worth over centuries of use on the pampas, and gauchos found it particularly well suited for hunting ostriches.²⁴

William McCann, who crossed the pampas in the early 1850s, described a typical ostrich hunt:

Hunting ostriches is a favourite sport. When a hunting-party is formed, it is customary to move in a circular form, gradually closing in upon the birds until they become alarmed, and seek safety in flight; the hunters then give chase, and when within proper distance throw the bolas at their legs, and so bring them to the ground.²⁵

Such ostrich hunts or *boleadas* had considerable economic importance, because gauchos could sell the feathers for export to the merchant at the local

22 Philip Ashton Rollins. *The Cowboy* (Albuquerque, 1922), p. 181; Lucas and Smith. *Saga*, p. 58. On the importance of knife play, see Ezequiel Martínez Estrada, *X-Ray of the Pampa*, trans. Alain Swietlicki (Austin, 1971), pp. 52-53.

23. Slatta *Gauchos*, pp. 25-26.

24. William MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles' Ride through the Argentine Provinces*, 2 vols. (London, 1853). I:14; Robert B. Cunningham Graham, "La Pampa," in *Rodeo: A Collection of the Tales and Sketches of R. B. Cunningham Graham*, ed. A. F. Tschiffely (Garden City, 1936), pp. 68-70.

25. MacCann, *Two Thousand Miles' Ride*, I: 14.

pulpería. But beyond that, the hunt became a festive occasion. Dozens of riders might gather from miles around to participate. Gauchos sometimes set range fires to drive the ostriches out of brushy areas into the open where the bolas could do their work. Naturally, this practice did nothing to endear them to ranchers who lost livestock and grazing lands to the fires.²⁶

The Argentine ranching elite and their political representatives also wanted to deprive the gaucho of the ability to subsist independently. Hunting provided income that helped the gaucho maintain his economic independence. The ranching elite, often faced with labor shortages, wished to coerce gauchos into working as subservient peons on the large estancias of the pampa. Argentine officials, at the request of the landed elite, repeatedly forbade boleadas, as well as other gaucho contests, in an ultimately successful attempt to extirpate the unruly social group from society.²⁷

Two other gaucho contests show a strong resemblance to practices of horsemen elsewhere. *La sortija* (the ring race) entertained crowds and riders into the twentieth century. The roots of the game extended back to sixteenth-century Spain and likely go back to Moorish origins. A gaucho, armed with a foot-long wooden lance, galloped toward a tiny golden ring dangling from a slender thread. The rider who successfully skewered the ring won it as a prize. He would then likely present it to a woman he wished to impress. Because it was relatively tame and held no economic significance, this contest did not suffer elite circumscription as did many other more objectionable gaucho practices. But by the early twentieth century, it too became much less common.²⁸

Of course, Spain held no monopoly on equestrian games. A similar practice appeared in the antebellum South. The southern fixation for medieval chivalry extended to replicating a tamer version of a jousting tournament. Rising to great popularity in the 1840s in Virginia, riders used eleven-foot-long lances to spear a series of rings ranging in diameter from a half-inch to two inches. The rings dangled from supports spaced 25 to 30 yards apart. A rider would cover the hundred yard course in about ten seconds, skewering as many of the elusive rings as possible. Such contests are still held in some parts of the South.²⁹

The gaucho's favorite contest, however, involved much more violence and attracted vigorous elite opposition. *Pato* (duck) was something of a cross-country free-for-all on horseback. William Henry Hudson, an Anglo-Argentine writer, well described the game in which riders fought for possession of the duck. A large duck, wrote Hudson, was

killed and sewn up in apiece of stout raw hide, forming a somewhat shapeless ball, twice as big as a football, and provided with four loops or handles of strong

26. Emilio Daireaux. *Vida y costumbres en La Plata*. II vols. (Buenos Aires. 1888): II. 230-231; Buenos Aires Province, Ministro de Gobierno, *Memorio* (Buenos Aires. 1871-1872). pp. 703-704.

27. *Anales de la Sociedad Rural Argentina*. 16 (July 1882): 133-134; Ernesto Raúl Hernández, *Recopilación de leyes agrarias vinculadas a la ganadería* ([La Plata] ? 1952). pp. 65-66.

28. Octavio P. Alais. *Libro criollo Costumbres nacionales* (Buenos Aires, 1903), pp. 98-101; S. Griswold Morley. "Cowboy and Gaucho Fiction," *New Mexico Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 1946): 256; see the photograph of a ring racer in New Mexico in David R. Phillips, ed., *The Taming of the West: A Photographic Perspective* (Chicago, 1974). p. 99

29. Lucas and Smith. *Saga*, pp. 99-100

twisted raw hide made of a convenient size to be grasped by a man's hand There would perhaps be a scuffle or scrimmage, as in football, only the strugglers would be first on horseback before dragging each other to earth.")

Riders would range for miles across the pampa, scattering livestock, destroying fences, and wreaking havoc. Like the boleadas, pato attracted the ire of ranchers and government officials because of livestock loss and property damage. Spanish colonial and later Argentine national officials banned the contests at least six times between 1799 and 1899. But pato's popularity persisted as long as the gaucho roamed.³¹

Some commentators have drawn a sharp contrast between play, as purposeless activity done for its own sake, and work. Johan Huizinga and Michael Novak have depicted work as virtually antithetical to the freedom and playfulness supposedly embodied in sport. Gauchos did not recognize such a distinction between work and play. As long as they could be on horseback, their work included strong elements of play. Dangerous, vigorous equestrian contests employed the same "real life" work skills necessary for survival and employment in a frontier ranching economy. Whether hunting ostriches for profit, running a gauntlet of friends in the pialar, or rounding up cattle on the estancia, gauchos reveled in anything done on horseback. Riding was the joyful essence of gaucho life. As Don Segundo, the protagonist of the superb novel of gaucho life by Ricardo Güiraldes, put it, "A gaucho on foot is fit for nothing but the manure pile."³²

In the 1840s, Hudson described the playfulness of a gaucho confronting a steer. The rider might "leap lightly onto its back, stick his spurs in its sides, and, using the flat of his long knife as a whip, pretend to be riding a race, yelling with fiendish glee." Observers watching gauchos at work during the busy round up season verify that gauchos enjoyed the activity greatly. They readily mixed pleasure with work, as long as both involved riding horses. Like the remaining elements of their equestrian subculture, gaucho games and contests showed strong, persevering folk roots that extended well back into Argentina's colonial past.³³

But Argentina also developed a contrasting elite culture that stood in opposition to the folk culture of the gaucho masses. National political and intellectual elites of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have often looked at their nation's history as an on-going struggle between the forces of "civilization" and "barbarism." According to this elite world view, the Europeanized capital of the nation, Buenos Aires, represented the repository of civilized people and culture. Gauchos and *caudillos*, local political chieftans of the interior

30 William Henry Hudson. *Tales of the Pampa* (New York. 1916). pp. 245-253. For a brief account of the similar Mexican "chicken race," see Reid, *Scouting Expeditions*. pp. 59-60.

31. Jorge Paez. *Del truquiflor a la rayuela: Panorama de los juegos y entretenimientos argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1971). pp 26-27.

32. Guttman. *From Ritual to Record*. pp. 3-4; see Gruneau, *Class. Sports*. pp. 23-34 for an excellent critique of Huizinga and Novak. Quote from Güiraldes. *Don Segundo Sombra: Shadows on the Pampas*. trans. Harriet de Onis (New York. 1966). p. 173.

33. Hudson. *Fur Away and Long Ago A History of My Early Life* (New York. 1918). pp. 40-41; Michael G. Mulhall and Edward T. Mulhall, *Handbook of the River Plate Republics* (London. 1875). pp. 108-109.

provinces, epitomized backwardness and barbarism. Conflict between these opposing forces occurred throughout Latin America during the nineteenth century.³⁴

From the 1820s on, *porteño* elites (those in the port city of Buenos Aires) waged military and legal war against gauchos. They passed a welter of restrictive legislation, including internal passports, working papers, and vagrancy laws, designed to curtail his freedoms. Their goal was to conscript him into the frontier militia to fight against another barbarian threat--the Indians of the pampa—or to transform him into a docile, obedient ranch peon.³⁵

Subsequent administrations, notably the long dictatorship of Juan Manuel de Rosas during the 1830s and 1840s, extended the efforts. Beginning with Buenos Aires province in 1865, officials formulated comprehensive rural codes that sounded the death knell for the gaucho way of life. These broad-ranging codes, backed with better armed and more diligent police and military forces, virtually outlawed the gaucho life.³⁶

No area of life went untouched. The ranching elite meant to expunge all relics of the backward gaucho. Some ranchers forced diet changes as an economy measure. The traditional fare of self-service beef and mate around an open fire gave way to measured cafeteria-style service. Cecilio López, a landowner in Buenos Aires province, estimated savings of 40 percent with the change. López also banned the drinking of mate, of tremendous nutritional, social, and cultural significance to the gaucho. Other new laws forbade the gaucho's traditional home-made boots, crafted from the leg skin of a horse. Ranchers charged that men rustled and killed horses simply to make such a pair of boots. In stripping the gaucho of his traditional dress, diet, and pursuits, the elite made impossible his self-sufficient survival.³⁷

By the 1880s, gauchos faced few viable options. Their means of livelihood and recreation--often one and the same thing--had been eliminated. They could labor as sedentary peons, under the thumb of a ranch overseer, who even forced them to perform hated foot work. One commentator painted an unhappy portrait of the docile ranch peon who followed the gaucho:

But the last gaucho has galloped across the far-away horizon of the pampas and into the twilight of history, and Argentina has lost its most characteristic and attractive citizen. His successor is a poor, miserable, underpaid peon who is called a *paisano* but never a gaucho.³⁸

34. Burns. *Poverty of Progress*: David McCreery, "Debt Servitude in Rural Guatemala. 1876-1936." *Hispanic American Historical Review* 63 (November 1983): 735-759; Robert Paul Matthews, Jr. "Rural Violence and Social Unrest in Venezuela. 1840-1858: Origins of the Federalist War" (Ph.D. diss. New York University, 1974); Gastón Gori, *Vagos y mal entretenidos: Aporte al tema hernandiano*. 2d ed. (Santa Fe, 1965).

35. Buenos Aires Province. Registro oficial (Buenos Aires, 1822), pp. 69, 170, 277; Benito Díaz *Juzgados de paz de la campaña de la Provincia de Buenos Aires, 1821-1854* (La Plata, 1959), pp. 105-106; 202-203.

36. Rodríguez Molas. *Historia social*, pp. 229-234; Alfredo J. Montoya, *Historia de los saladeros argentinos* (Buenos Aires, 1970), pp. 45-46, 57, 60. The rural code of Buenos Aires Province is reprinted in Hernández. *Recopilación* pp. 8-45.

37. A. R. Fernández. *Prontuario informativo de 'a provincia de Buenos Aires* (Buena Aires, 1903): II: 37-38; Godofredo Daireaux. *La cría de ganado en la estancia moderna* 3d ed. (Buenos Aires, 1904), p. 96; Francisco Baurzá. *Estudios literarios* (Montevideo, 1885), pp. 249-250.

38. John W. White. *Argentina: The Life Story of a Nation* (New York, 1942), p. 73.

Gauchos could also accept forced service in the military, under penurious conditions. Soldiers faced harsh, corporal punishments, meager, late pay, and few incentives to do anything other than desert. Many did and other gauchos avoided service altogether by riding to the remote frontier-beyond the pale of civilization's restrictions. These frontiersmen usually led an outlaw existence to survive. Some of the last groups of gauchos were bands of ostrich hunters and rustlers who pursued the giant birds and killed cattle illegally in remote frontier areas.³⁹

In similar fashion, and as a part of the same process, the gaucho's wild, dangerous equestrian contests of the past century became transformed and "civilized." Modernizing Argentine politicians worked hard and successfully to alter or to eliminate the gaucho and his way of life. By the 1890s, the once frenetic and sometimes fatal contest of pato had been tamed and institutionalized. Organized rules had been written and leagues formed under the auspices of the Argentine Pato Federation. The new sport of pato featured two four-man teams, riding about a field 90 yards wide and 230 yards long. Players had to carry a six-handled leather ball with arm outstretched so that opponents could try to snatch. Tossing the ball into a net suspended on a nine-foot pole earned a point. The Federation also managed a handicapping system, like that of polo. These modernizing actions changed pato from a participant folk contest into an elite spectator sport, for the edification of gentlemen and ladies of Buenos Aires.⁴⁰

Writing in the early 1920s, Captain J. Macnie observed that the old gaucho equestrian practices had disappeared. No riders now performed the daring and dangerous maroma or pialar. Macnie found that the ranch peon on the modern estancia could not "sit a really bad horse." He had lost the finely honed riding skills that allowed his gaucho predecessor to stay on virtually any mount.⁴¹

In place of the popular gaucho contests, Macnie saw spectator sports for the leisured class. The porteño elite imported polo from Europe, along with other English and French cultural artifacts. Many Argentine polo players gained world-wide reputations. The Jockey Club, Hurlingham, Tortugas, Mar del Plata, Colonel Suárez, and North Sante Fe were only the foremost of polo teams organized throughout the country. Cup of the Americas competition between the United States and Argentina began in 1928, with the former winning the first two meetings. But thereafter Argentina won the cup five successive times, between 1936 and 1969.⁴²

The elite of Buenos Aires, flush with new wealth from booming beef and cereal exports, took to extensive gambling on horse races and other sporting events. During the decade of the 1890s, porteños spent a half-billion pesos on

39. Thomas Woodbine Hinchliff. *South American Sketches* (London, 1863). pp. 89, 195; Robert Crawford. *Across the Pampas and the Andes* (London, 1884). pp. 115-116; Carlos D'Amico. *Siete años en el gobierno de la Provincia de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires, 1895). p. 99.

40. Paez Del truquiflor, pp. 26-27; John Arlott, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Word sports and Games* (London, 1975). p. 791.

41. J. Macnie. *Work and Play in the Argentine* (London, 1925). pp. 142-143.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 144; Arlott, *Oxford Companion*, p.791.

gambling—one fifth of the total value of exports for the period. During the twentieth century, Argentine races and horses gained fame. Arturo A, the winningest horse in South American history, Old Man, Macon, and Yatasto became known by race fans around the world. The elite met at races including the Gran Premio Carlos Pellegrini, Gran Premio Nacional, and the Gran Premio Jockey Club which became world-renowned.⁴³

One of the foremost symbols of the cultural hegemony of the landed elite was the opulent Jockey Club, founded in 1881. That organization provided a meeting place and a means of limiting access to elite status. The club sponsored races with thoroughbred horses and brought the high culture of the turf to Buenos Aires. The racetrack generated such huge profits that by the early twentieth century, the Jockey Club was looking hard to find charities worthy of its noblesse oblige. In this way, the club provided the same functions of social discrimination and status as jockey clubs of the ante bellum American South.⁴⁴

Rodeo performers began making the rounds to Buenos Aires, Rosario, and other major cities, entertaining urban crowds of people who had never sat a horse. In 1909 the Sociedad Sportiva Argentina (Argentine Sport Society) announced a rodeo competition in which the winners would travel to the United States to compete against rodeo riders from several countries. In another sign of change, Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show added riders dressed as gauchos to their European and American performances. Spectacles and organized sport had supplanted the gaucho's traditional folk contests.⁴⁵

In yet another sign of change, bicycles became as commonplace on the pampas as horses. Small towns cheered bicycle racers at the central plaza instead of the wild gaucho riders of yesteryear. By 1899, cycling clubs had spread to many small towns on the pampa. Fierce local rivalries developed between neighboring villages, and some even planned construction of veledromes. In short, by the turn of the century, the elite expurgation of the gaucho's barbarism appeared complete. A new, rich, Europeanized, civilized Argentina faced the twentieth century with pride and confidence.⁴⁶

But all was not well for the Argentine nouveaux riches or for their nation. Having successfully dispatched the unruly gaucho, the ruling elite now found its power and position threatened by labor and social unrest generated by masses of European immigrants. The specters of anarchism and socialism, which sought to redress Argentina's social and political inequities, frightened the national leadership. Xenophobia and elite class fears created the need for a political symbol to combat the immigrant working class. Ironically, the once despised barbarian gaucho made a significant comeback. The intelligentsia resurrected and reformed the much-maligned gaucho and presented him as the

43. James R. Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York, 1974), p. 234; Arlott, *Oxford Companion*, p. 503

44. Scobie, *Buenos Aires*, pp. 119, 190; Rader, *American sports* p. 20.

45. *El orden* (Buenos Aires), January 6, 1909; *El municipio* (Buenos Aires), September 8, 19, 1909.

46. Pedal, "El ciclismo olavarricense." *La parria* (Olavarría), June 29, 1899; see also issues of July 2, 1899; February 15, 1900.

epitome of Argentine national character. To counter the immigrant working class threat, the elite endowed this mythical figure with nationalistic virtues that they desired in the masses—obedience, patriotism, loyalty, diligence. Just as ritualized sport supplanted popular contests, so a symbolic gaucho replaced the real historical figure.⁴⁷

The reformed gaucho even moved from the pampa to the soccer field. When Argentina hosted (and won) the World Cup soccer championship in 1978, the official mascot chosen to represent the nation to the world was a little gaucho boy kicking a soccer ball. “Mundialito,” the modernized little gaucho, wore the sky blue and white national colors of the government that had doomed the historical gaucho a century earlier.⁴⁸

The birth of organized sport in Argentina, the death of the gaucho as a social group, and the demise of his equestrian games and contests represent elements of a larger class struggle that dominated nineteenth century Latin America. Everywhere, Europeanized elites imposed their cultural and ideological hegemony on the rural masses. As William H. Beezley has shown, the elite of Porfirian Mexico imported baseball, bicycling, and other sports to show their modernity and civility. The Argentine experience conforms to the conflict-coercion perspective on sport and play. A clearly identifiable ruling elite successfully extended their political control over the nation at the expense of the rural masses.⁴⁹

Across the Andes to the west, the Chilean landed elite took similar steps to control their rural masses. By 1920, rich Chilean landowners had organized soccer leagues and established fields on their estates. One goal was to provide a more constructive use of leisure time to curtail excessive gambling and drinking among their workers. But they also sought to create in the rural lower class a sense of solidarity, loyalty, and identification with the hacienda. As in Argentina, elite cultural hegemony often involves both imposed change and efforts to establish lower class complicity with the cultural values of the dominant class. Organized sport is one means of creating bonds across class lines that help to attenuate potentially explosive class conflict.⁵⁰

The transition from “the age of folk games to the age of spectators” occurred in many cultures but under very different historical conditions. In Argentina, the porteño elite made a concerted effort to eradicate the playful, if violent participatory contests of the gaucho, considered to be vestiges of an unwanted, barbaric past. They replaced these practices with organized, civilized pato and imported rodeo, polo, and thoroughbred racing in keeping with the desire to

47. Slatta, “The Gaucho in Argentina’s Quest for National Identity,” *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism* 12 (1985): 99-122. On the nationalistic backlash to immigration, see Carl E. Solberg, *Immigration and Nationalism: Argentina and Chile, 1890-1914* (Austin, 1970).

48. Slatta, “The Gaucho in Argentina’s Quest,” p. 118.

49. William H. Beezley, “Baseball, Boxing and Bicycling in Porfirian Mexico,” paper presented to the North American Society for Sport History, Mont Alto, PA, May 1983.

50. Arnold J. Bauer, *Chilean Rural Society from the Spanish Conquest to 1930* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 166. For a description of earlier Chilean equestrian games, see Eugenio Pereira Salas, *Juegos y alegrías coloniales en Chile* (Santiago, 1947).

recreate European civilization. Much as professional rodeo in the United States strayed from its roots in ranching and ranch work, so organized equestrian sport in Argentina had little relevance to traditional gaucho life. The new equestrian sports showed the definitive victory of a modernizing, urban elite over the rural masses. The transformation of play into sport in Argentina thus mirrors the larger sociopolitical forces and power relationships that shaped the nation's history of conflict during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.⁵¹

51 The quoted phrase is the subtitle from Rader. *American Sports*: Gruneau, "Sport." pp. 136. 170.