

Soccer in Argentina: A Lecture*

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It is a great pleasure for me to talk about this topic of soccer. . and to make some points that could help you understand the Argentine reality. You may talk with an economist, sociologist or politician; each will help you to put together the Argentine puzzle. This puzzle may have 600 or 700 pieces, I don't know, but for sure it would not be complete without the inclusion of the tango and soccer. (This is for real. You can not talk about soccer without talking about tango as well; it is like talking about New Orleans and not mentioning Jazz. If you don't mention Jazz there is something missing in a discussion of New Orleans). Maybe the pieces referring to soccer and tango are small, but no puzzle of 600 pieces could be complete with only 598, it needs the remaining two.

Soccer was brought to the Argentine by the British traders who came to Argentine ports. The origins of the game are found in the second half of the last century, mainly in the second third. The oldest clubs are about a hundred years old. The common characteristic of these clubs is that they represented entertainment for the crews of the trading ships (generally British) who came into the ports. So we have old clubs of British, not Mediterranean origins, in the port towns of the country. The teams first appeared in the port of Rosario, once the most important port of the country. There were other ocean ports, Blanca, La Plata, and Buenos Aires, where soccer soon appeared. Soccer clubs were quickly established there as well. The diffusion of soccer was encouraged by the creation in Argentina of British schools. If you were given at the time a list of major schools to which you could send your children, you would notice prominent names such as St. Paul's, St. Patrick's, St. Peter's. These schools were created mainly for the children of the British who were temporarily in Argentina, so these British youngsters could continue with an English education, which included the sport of soccer. Still another factor of British influence in Argentine life that has left a deep mark was the intermarriage between the British and the Argentines. Anglo-Argentine families tended to duplicate the English leisure interest in horse racing, and, especially, soccer. In all three of these ways, the British were mainly responsible for the establishment of soccer in Argentina.

There have been basically two fundamental stages in the story of soccer in this country, the amateur and the professional eras. The amateur years, I would

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say, was a romantic period. Isn't it romantic when one family composes an entire soccer team? One of the early Argentine teams was Jalumes, and every player on the team was a member of the Brown family. Occasionally the team needed a good left mid-fielder or a center forward, but nobody else but a Brown could play any position on the team. Another example of both the amateur and romantic quality of early soccer was the reaction of another team to a penalty given by the referee. The players protested the decision by sitting down on the field. The goalie sat down beside the goal while one of their opponents just dribbled in for an easy goal. Then the team did it again-when the game restarted, the players just sat down and let their opponents score another goal. Over and over they repeated the same performance to show how upset they were with the referee's decision.

In the beginning, in this amateur period, soccer was practiced as a relaxing activity, and it evolved into social clubs. On the amateur level, churches, schools, and even the railroad companies sponsored teams. There still exists a church league in Buenos Aires that was created at the turn of the century.

The decade of the 1920s witnessed a transition; some Argentine teams traveled to play abroad. One example of this development came in 1926 when the Boca Juniors team went to Europe. The team was viewed as national heroes. The players were cheered at their departure by crowds. It was also a year when the first important European team, Fedenbarkush of Hungary, came to Buenos Aires. This started to stimulate international interest and exchanges.

After these romantic years came the professional era, beginning in 1931. Soccer during the professional period, became a game, and a business. This stage is not restricted geographically to the coast, teams are not owned or controlled by single families, and teams begin to make a profit. Unfortunately, this stage has also come to include violence in soccer as well; this is a calamity that must lead to changes in the game. In this period, Argentine soccer also continued its move from the local to the international stage. In major leagues, soccer is organized into clubs, which compared to the clubs from the United States (baseball teams for example) are not that powerful. There is some question of whether these Argentine clubs are business enterprises first, or social organizations. This ambivalence complicates their operations. During the professional period, soccer also developed a relationship to the government.

After 1931, the clubs built their great stadiums, paid large salaries to the outstanding players, and kept and publicized national records. The players, of course, demanded money and after 1931 they did it in an organized way.

The clubs in the beginning were considered as non-profit organizations, but professional operations because they charged admission to games, paid taxes and paid salaries to the players and to the people who worked at the stadiums. These early professional clubs lacked the money to buy good players; wealthy club members would contribute to a player's salary through a quota system (in money or in kind) assessed on the membership. The same system is still used in some clubs today. For example, if Racing wanted to get "John Smith" to play for its team, but could not pay him in cash, the club members might be assessed

bags of cement or other construction materials that he would then sell to contractors.

The construction of club-owned stadiums reveals much about the professional nature of Argentine soccer. Each club owns its own stadium. If you talk about business, this is like having a big factory building just to use a single machine. In the majority of countries, there are two or three stadiums in each city. In Buenos Aires there are about twenty-five professional stadiums. If a riot occurs in a stadium, its doors will have to close for three seasons. These clubs, with few exceptions, are economically weak, but everyone wants to have a club in his own neighborhood with, of course, its own stadium. It is silly that there are stadiums for 70,000 to 80,000 people capacity just across the street from each other. Some time ago, there were two stadiums, belonging to Atlanta and Cacharita Junior, that touched each other. They had been constructed to share one wall. The owners never scheduled a game at the same time because they did not want to divide the local fans. San Lorenzo de Rodeo, the Hurricanes of Rodeo, have a stadium, and fifteen blocks away is the stadium of Camilo Oeste. This soccer business was called professional because spectators had to buy a ticket to watch a game, but it really was not a business because the boards of directors of the soccer clubs were amateur in their business practices. If there has existed a way to gain social prestige in Argentine, it has been to become the president of a soccer club. Generally these presidents have been businessmen and bankers, who are very rich and not interested in making more money, but in having a soccer team as a kind of hobby. Club presidents do not receive a salary. Nevertheless, it is expected that when there is a bad season, that the club president will pay the players and coach from his own pocket.

The professional years from 1931 to 1969 were dominated by five clubs: Boca Juniors, River Plate, Independiente, Racing and San Lorenzo. No team from outside this group won the championship. During these thirty-eight years there was a monopoly on soccer titles by the economically strongest clubs. From 1969 until 1985, there has been a change with championships won on occasion by smaller, financially weaker clubs. This has been the result of the decline in the quality of players in the biggest clubs that followed the departure of many world class players to Europe.

When we talk about the international side of Argentine soccer, we must take into account that Argentina has been very good at the club level, even in those years when the national team has done poorly. Argentina's participation in World Cup soccer began in 1930 when the games were played in Montevideo, Uruguay. In the 1930s, everything was like a family in world club play. After those games, Argentina dropped out of world cup competition until 1956.

The national team was selected as an all-star squad from the players of all the clubs in the country. The Asociación de Fútbol, the national organization, appoints a technical director, who is in charge of picking and training the best players. The Argentine national team began its resurgence after Argentina lost 6 to 1 to Czechoslovakia in an elimination match for the Sweden Cup in 1969. From that disaster the national team began to improve dramatically. Also during

the 1960s several new championships were established, for example, the club championship played between the club champion of Europe and the club champion of the Americas. In 1967, Racing won the national and the hemispheric titles, then captured the world championship by defeating the European team in this competition. Then came the greatest success until now (1985), when Argentina won the 1978 World Cup [Argentina won its second World Cup in 1986].

What is soccer in Argentina today? Is it a business, a sport, a cultural emblem? I would say that it is a little of each of these things. If sport is a healthy and playful activity, then soccer could only be considered a sport in the schools or when it is played with friends on a picnic. But when you go to a stadium to see a soccer match, you do not see people playing a game or trying to fulfill the motto of "mente sana in corpore sano," nor do you see anyone enjoying a game. You see people who are trying to win at any price.

Public opinion polls [the author's son directs Argentina's most important national opinion polling service] reveal that what people miss in soccer today is the "pure game." I made a survey myself, and asked people which players they considered the best. Nobody mentioned a defensive player. Everyone answered, giving the name of a forward, especially one that scores most of the goals. This indicates to me that people no longer go to see a team play, but they want to see a team win. Soccer means to win. There is an American saying: to win is not the most important thing in life, it is the only thing in life. I don't remember who said it, Truman? Anyway it explains modern soccer.

What is attractive about soccer is that the field is so large, that, with only 11 players on a team, there is the possibility for sustained action. In American football, you see movement for about 15 seconds before it stops. In soccer, you can see movement for three or four minutes, with the ball going back and forth, and forward. Sometimes, however, the players don't play. They kick each other and make fouls. This makes the action choppy.

In Argentina today, soccer can be considered a sport in the respect that the players move and use their muscles, and compete against each other. But, in professional soccer the final objective can be said to be just business, to make money for the players and for the club.

Soccer clubs play a role in social life today, because people join together around different clubs. They serve almost as neighborhood social organizations. As non-profit enterprises, the clubs pay taxes and are expected to do things that the government should do, such as provide community facilities. The schools in Argentina do not have soccer fields, so school teams use club practice areas.

Government has also become involved with soccer, practicing what is known as "government futbolismo." This is one dimension of what many Argentines believe is the fifty-year-old illness of "governmentitis," in which the national administration meddles in all aspects of national life. The government now decides how and when the soccer championships will be played.

Professional soccer also mirrors the structure of the national government.

Argentina is a country that adopted a federal system that was born in Buenos Aires, the predominate province. So we see a constant struggle throughout all our political history between the small provinces that want to participate in the federal government and the national government in Buenos Aires that holds the power. This reinforced the colonial heritage from Spain that was absolutely vertical. From the beginning of the European period, we have had poor provinces and a rich capital. The goods come from the provinces, but the capital collects taxes on them and markets them. The capital is the center of trade for petroleum, sugar and all the goods of the country. Although there is a system of tax distribution called "co-participation," the provinces remain poor.

With respect to soccer, it happens the same way. When we talk about a championship team, we picture a team from Buenos Aires. In reality on most of the teams in Buenos Aires, eight or nine of the eleven players come from the provinces. So the force for soccer comes from places like Santiago de Estero or Catamara, but these towns never win the championships because the best players are purchased by teams in the capital. No provincial team has ever captured the national professional championship. What confirms the abilities of provincial players is the fact that college and high school tournaments are often won by teams from outside Buenos Aires. The sport runs parallel to the national administration.

The best days of soccer are gone. The best days for the sport were the same as those for the tango: the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Now the tango is not as common as before, you can see a good tango in only a few nightclubs that are very expensive. In the three decades I mentioned you could find a band playing tango, or a girl, required to have really nice legs, dancing the tango accompanied by a victrola in any cafe. Now both the tango and soccer have changed.

Violence is one reason the good days of soccer have passed. Not long ago a youngster was killed in a riot after a game. The stadiums are public places that attract all kinds of people, in these crowds there are thieves and criminals as well as soccer fans. There are also those who smuggle sticks and chains into the game, because they go looking for a fight. It is illegal to sell liquor or beer at any of the games, but people manage to get drunk by carrying in hidden bottles. This follows the old Spanish saying, "Make a law; make a way to break it."The clubs contribute to the situation because often they will give away tickets just to fill the stadium with people who will cheer for their team with the idea of intimidating the other squad. These free tickets usually are given to people on the street. The police and security forces sometimes contribute to the violence as well. The police have little education and training; although they are supposed to control violence, they sometimes provoke riots by their actions. These security officers reflected the military-controlled national government that relied on force to compel order. This use of force became especially common with the disappearance of persons who were opposed to the regime. A culture of

violence and terrorism developed in our society. So again we see the parallel between the national regime and professional soccer.

There are still people that enjoy soccer, but do not go to the games because they are scared by the violence that sometimes occurs. The television, newspapers, and magazines continue to create the mystique of national soccer and Argentine players and it plays a vital role in our national culture.