

“Equestrian Sports of the Argentine Pampas”

RICHARD W. SLATTA

North Carolina State University

Gauchos, migratory horsemen of the pampas of southern South America, developed as a distinct social group during the eighteenth century and existed as such until about the 1870s. Consummate horsemen, they lived to ride, and not surprisingly, many of their principal forms of entertainment involved contests on horseback. Their equestrian sports clearly illustrate their Hispanic heritage, their macho subculture, and the demise of their sports shows the larger socio-political forces that doomed their way of life in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.

Most of the gaucho's equestrian contests were macho duels or challenges to another man's skill, strength, courage, and manly pride. Races such as “crowding horses,” the *cinchada* (tug-of-war), and *pechando* or “breasting” involved strength and courage in man and beast as much as speed. Serious injury was of slight concern to the gaucho, and both rider and mount often suffered in such violent contests. Other competition involved individual shows of prowess instead of violent, head-to-head conflict. Gauchos might leap from a corral crossbar onto the back of a racing wild horse or steer. In another exercise, a rider disassembled his multi-layered saddle at a gallop, dropped each piece to the ground, and re-assembled the saddle on a return pass.

Two contests bear a strong resemblance to practices among Mexican and North American horsemen of the Southwest. *La sortija*, the ring race, involved skewering a small gold ring suspended by a thread with a short lance. This contest dates back to sixteenth-century Spain and probably has Moorish roots. The favorite gaucho game of *pato* (duck) resembles the Mexican game of *correr el gallo* (the chicken race). In *pato*, many riders contested the possession of a duck sewed up in a large leather ball. They would ride miles across the pampa, pulling each other off the sweating mounts, and often damaging property and scattering livestock. After hours of hard riding, gauchos gathered at *pulperia* or country tavern for drinking and feasting.

Government officials repeatedly banned many gaucho contests, such as the *pato* race, but gauchos continued to practice them as long as possible. By the 1870s however, repressive legislation circumscribed the gaucho way of life, and he and his sports became increasingly rare. By the early twentieth century, the wild, dangerous contests of the past had been domesticated. *Pato* teams played in leagues according to written rules. Argentine gauchos lost their way of life and sports because modernizing governments found them barbaric, backward, and contrary to “civilized” society.

Many of the gaucho’s sports grew from rural work practices and from survival skills necessary to ride and live on the harsh pampean frontier. But the contests also show the competitive, violent character of machismo -also evident in other areas of gaucho life. Ironically, the oppressed gaucho of the nineteenth century was reformed and resurrected as a symbol for Argentine national character in the twentieth. When Argentina hosted (and won) the 1978 World Cup, the official mascot that represented the nation was a little gaucho boy named “Mundialito” – this time kicking a soccer ball instead of riding a horse.