

History of Latin American Sports: The End Before the Beginning?

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About a year ago, a young Brazilian scholar lamented the fact that few of her countrymen had yet chosen to study the history of their national sports and that those who had addressed the topic had failed, first, by not separating sports from physical education or, second, by not adequately considering the social context of their subject.¹ In calling for more comprehensive and analytical analyses of sports history, this disciple of Clio was reiterating the sentiments of the better known Uruguayan historian and social critic, Eduardo Galeano, who, in his brilliant survey of soccer first published in Spanish in 1995, likewise chastised the academy for almost totally avoiding the path that the soccer ball — that glorious sphere — had trampled across the sweep of history: ‘An astonishing void: official history ignores soccer. Contemporary history texts fail to mention it, even in passing, in countries where it has been and continues to be a primordial symbol of collective identity’.² And a group of Peruvian scholars who recently collaborated on a study of soccer in their country hoped that publication of their musings would ‘serve to initiate in our midst a collective work of reflection about this sport, art, spectacle, and passion’ that almost daily arouses such emotion.³

In brief, be it soccer or other sports, serious study of their history within

Latin America has barely reached its infancy. And for me, it is a bit silly to talk about the end of something that is only really starting. I realise that we could debate the philosophical meaning and value of history. But, for now, I will identify what I think is the significant work in the field of Latin American sports history, what questions might meaningfully be raised, and what contribution this work could make, on one level, to our understanding of sports history broadly conceived, and, on another, to our understanding of Latin America.

I approach this by citing several recent works that illustrate my mental meanderings. In a highly stimulating sweep over several centuries of Caribbean history, Richard D. E. Burton highlights the process of

creolisation — ‘segmentary’ rather than ‘synthetic’, itself a function of ‘contention’ rather than ‘homogenisation’ — and raises two perspectives I believe valuable for students of sport: first, sport may at times be better treated not as a discrete factor by itself, but as an integral part of a larger ‘play’ complex. Second, while the play/sport or non-work realm enables people to challenge the dominant culture within their society, more often they are engaged in internal opposition rather than external resistance and, even when apparently successful, paradoxically wind up drawn more deeply into that or similar dominant culture. West Indians who revel in beating the Brits on the cricket pitch, or Brazilians who delight in kicking Europeans on the football field, or Cubans who assert their dominance on the baseball diamond, are in fact enjoying not the reality but the fantasy of power. The essence is not that these cultural nationalists are making the foreigner look foolish, ‘but that they are playing his game in the first place’. The subordinates celebrate victory within the system, but the system itself survives.⁴

Moving in somewhat the same direction, at least on Burton’s first point, cultural anthropologist/ethnographer Jeffrey Tobin sees fútbol (soccer) as one of three interrelated play elements in the reproduction and contestation of Argentine masculinity. The asado (Argentine barbecue) is a male-dominated activity that subordinates the female, yet is tied to images of feminisation of flesh based on textual connections to animals. Fútbol likewise is male dominated, yet again has mixed sexual meanings, as terms of sodomy and effeminacy are often ascribed to opponents. As with the asado, anal penetration may precede vaginal penetration in giving meaning to the game and feminisation to the victim. Tango is frequently depicted as male dominated, yet the history, literature, personalities, and various practices in the dance suggest a homosocial context. Agree with Tobin or not, his analysis relates sport to other social activities in a historical framework and links these in turn to a variety of political expressions such as the widespread use by the military regime of the late 1970s of torture techniques that involved anal penetration.⁵

Tobin builds his work in part on that of Argentine Eduardo Archetti who traces through the years of porteño soccer history several intertwining threads. First, looking at modes of ritualistic behaviour, the content of stadium chants, and readings from (male) sports magazines, he defines Argentine soccer as a ‘masculine discourse’ that reaffirms ‘father/son and macho/homosexual differences’, perhaps more among the

'peripheral' participants (read spectators) than the 'central' ones (read athletes). This emphasis on male identity, reinforced by violence and illegality in the larger society, especially starting in the 1970s, contributes to the persistence of fan violence. Second, soccer-based Argentine masculinity highlights autonomy, fantasy, force, power, authority, and maturity — though not necessarily work, discipline, and perseverance — which become, in turn, the basis for demarcating a 'national style' of soccer linked to the search for national identity. Archetti himself, however, doubts if such historical connections can be firmly established, since so much of soccer is carried out by individual players and/or coaches and is thus subject to conflicting interpretations, though he also argues that the creolisation of polo and soccer between 1880 and 1930, and the implied opposition to British characteristics, furthered the construction of an Argentine masculine image, if not a precisely unique national identity.⁶

Anthropologist Alan Klein has made two contributions to our understanding of Latin baseball, each of which focuses on a different historical and theoretical question. Summarising numerous articles, Klein sketches the place of baseball in the society of the Dominican Republic and its simultaneous and paradoxical role as a mechanism for expanding United States cultural penetration of the island and as a site for local resistance to that process. Extremely useful are the descriptions of the organisation of Dominican baseball and its ties to the North American professional system, the operations of the baseball academies, the ambiance at Quisqueya Stadium, the problems young Dominican athletes face in trying to adapt to North American values and life style, and the analysis of press reporting on Latin baseball in the context of North American structural domination. Klein remains optimistic in his view of Dominicans' ability through baseball to maintain a degree of cultural dignity and independence despite the sport's powerful function as an instrument of United States' cultural hegemony.⁷

More recently, looking at the interactive culture along the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo border between Laredo, Texas, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, Klein sees baseball as part of a process that has, over time, simultaneously constructed three levels of nationalism: 1) auto-nationalism, that traditional nationalism in which Mexicans and North Americans (USA) identify with their respective nation-states; 2) binationalism, by which peoples on each side of the border share experiences and feelings that derive from identification with both nations; and, 3) transnationalism, a

growing sense of common identity distinct from either Mexican or American nations.⁸

In his latest book, Uruguayan intellectual Eduardo Galeano combines his affection for soccer with his better-known historical perspectives, thus revealing the 'sunny' and the 'shadowy' (shady?) sides of the sport.⁹ For Galeano, the pleasure of soccer lies in its spontaneity, its creativity, its unpredictability. That's what drove two billion global fans to watch the 1994 Mundial via television. Unfortunately, professional soccer in the 1990s seeks to control every detail of the game, to win rather than enjoy, to convert the game into a lucrative spectacle that 'is organised not to play but to impede play'. Players are uniformly trained to be standardised machines and, stimulated by drugs, become 'running pharmacies', playing not in their home countries but where they get paid the most. Thanks to international standardisation, in today's world, 'whoever does not die of hunger, dies of boredom'. Yet — Galeano's optimism lives on — if soccer may be called 'a vulgar and wild business', it can be something more: 'a fiesta for the eyes that watch it and a joy for the body that plays it'. And for those who use the ball to break the mould, soccer can still express the unique qualities of a community: 'Tell me how you play and I'll tell you who you are'.¹⁰

These are among the most exciting studies to have appeared in the last decade and raise questions that might be applied to a variety of situations across the map and time-line of Latin American history.¹¹

In summary, I restate a point hinted at above: sports history is not unique. If there is value and meaning in studying any history, there is value and meaning in studying all history. Francis Fukuyama, who ten years ago proposed the 'end of history', though more as a process than a discipline, has apparently concluded that human nature is not constant, change goes on, and, by extension, historical study can be insightful.¹² Other so-called postmodernists may question the value of studying much of the past and challenge the notion that human existence is better today than at some arbitrarily chosen point in the past, but while I agree that historical development is not always linear — far from it — I do think that on balance we are collectively better off than at many times in the past, possibly in part because of sports. In any case, to justify their argument, even postmodernists need a valid historical record.¹³ Also, for too long, as we frequently repeat, historians ignored sports and often other areas of life. But I see no reason now to believe that sports history is

again to be factored out of the study of history, though it appears that within some disciplines those who do study sports and the works they produce often go unrecognised by their colleagues.¹⁴ If there is a crisis in the field because some departments of kinesiology, or whatever, want to replace the humanities and social sciences with more motor related courses, that is more a question of curriculum and university politics than of true intellectual disagreement.¹⁵

Second, I re-emphasise my oft-argued stance that the construction of valid theory requires a universal perspective. We can't seriously talk about the place of sport in human behaviour or the connection between sport and cultural imperialism or the role of sport in recent globalisation, etc., without looking at how these, and so many other patterns, have worked out in different geographical, temporal, and cultural contexts. Sports history, and philosophy, and sociology, even literature, can ultimately generalise about sport and society only when we practitioners have adequate knowledge of the extent of the sporting phenomenon. Based on my plunge into the historiography of sports in Latin America, I'm convinced we do not yet have that. Yet, unfortunately, what little we do have for the Latin American area, as well as others, is rarely drawn on by scholars (mostly English speaking) who expound on the meaning of sportshistory.¹⁶ For example, in the three chapters devoted to sports sociology, sports history, and philosophy of sport — prepared by George Sage, Nancy Struna, and Scott Kretchmar respectively — included in the John D. Massengale and Richard A. Swanson, eds., volume, *The History of Exercise and Sport Science* (Human Kinetics, Champaign, 1997) there is not a single reference written by a Latin American scholar and only two about Latin American topics—Janet Lever on Brazilian soccer and Alan Klein on Dominican baseball, both cited by Sage. Similarly, Alan Gordon, although he labels Steve Pope's edited volume, *The New American Sport History: Recent Approaches and Perspectives* (1996), an 'excellent book', nonetheless decries the fact that most of the entries treat sport 'in isolation': few set sporting mentalities in the 'long term' and few 'situate themselves in broader North American or Euro-American' or, I would add, Latin American contexts. All of which, again in Gordon's words, 'reflects a continuing parochialism among American sports historians'.¹⁷

In short, when we do attempt to fill the gap, I hope we will do more than examine sport in its narrowest confines. As seen in the works of Burton, Tobin, Galeano, Klein, and previously C. L. R. James, we need to

broaden our definitions of sport and our sense of the connectedness of sport to other human and societal experiences and institutions. We certainly must move our research and conclusions across disciplines, cultures, national boundaries, genders, classes, and languages. This desire for emersion may explain why, at the moment, I am intrigued by ethnographic and literary representations of Latin American sport, if placed, of course, in proper historical context.¹⁸

Last, possibly in contradiction of my own sombre ramblings, is the admonition that we not take this too seriously. Steve Pope recently lamented the fact, as he reads it, that sports history is not sufficiently 'contentious'.¹⁹ Why, ask I, should it have to be? Several recent publications on soccer raise these caution flags: Argentine-turned-Spaniard, soccer star-turned-writer, Jorge Valdano, warns that 'a trip by the intelligence through the surroundings of soccer proves most pleasant, so long as we do not try to understand it', for it is a world of dreams and illusions where one faces 'seduction by the sphere'. In a later collection of his writings, Valdano begs God to 'free us from the pseudo-scientists who still don't understand that soccer is a cultural fact and that (thanks, Fellini) "you can't interrupt emotion" ... Soccer attacked by the hyperrealist virus will have a sad destiny. Goodby seduction'. He also predicts that 'if someday soccer dies, it will be from seriousness'.

Similarly, the renowned Peruvian writer, Mario Vargas Llosa, advises that the problem, in trying to intellectualise soccer, is that 'reality overtakes theory'. For while theories are rational and logical, 'in society and individual behaviour, unreason, the unconscious and pure spontaneity will always play a part'. In short: 'football [soccer] offers people something that they can scarcely ever have: an opportunity to have fun, to enjoy themselves, to get excited, worked up, to feel certain intense emotions that daily routine rarely offers them'. Like Eduardo Galeano and others, Vargas Llosa rejects those who deplore soccer because it allegedly 'alienates and impoverishes the masses'; their problem is that they 'forget that it is important to have fun. And because 'it is ephemeral, non-transcendent, innocuous', because 'it is exciting and empty', soccer can be enjoyed equally by 'intelligent and unintelligent, cultured and uncultured people'.

Mexican historian Enrique Krauze observes that 'soccer is above all soccer. Its utility is ludic ... Like a literary text, the football match cannot simply be understood in terms of its social context: something always

spills over the edge of such an analysis'. Therefore, attempts to master the game intellectually could have 'disastrous consequences'. Argentine-Chilean-American Ariel Dorfman likewise recently concluded, although looking at more than just soccer, that 'if you reduce everything to politics and ideology, you end up totalising, squeezing the mystery out of life and explaining away too easily what at times has no explanation. ...'. Sports, soccer and beyond, may well be 'things we love [just because] they make us feel alive, arouse our deepest sentiments, and make us laugh and cry'.²⁰ Sports may just be like people about whom Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho observed that 'One is loved because one is loved. No reason is needed for loving'.²¹

In seeking explanations and building theories, we should not lose sight of these possibilities. Either way, an expanded understanding of sports history yields an expanded understanding of the human spirit. And to me that's what life in the academy is all about.

Notes

- 1 Patricia Falco Genovez, 'El desafío de Clio: el deporte como objeto de estudio, de la historia', *Lecturas: Educación Física y Deportes*, vol. 3 no. 9, 1998. Genovez recently collaborated with Victor Andrade de Melo, in preparing a most useful bibliography of works on the history of Brazilian physical education and sports that is available via Netscape; see, 'Bibliografía brasileira sobre história da educação física e do esporte', *Lecturas: Educación Física y Deportes*, vol. 3, no. 10, 1998.
- 2 Eduardo Galeano, *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, trans. Mike Fried, Versa, London, 1998, p. 209; originally published as *Fútbol a sol y sombra*, Siglo Veintiuno Editores, Mexico, D.F., 1995. Hints of these sentiments are found in the anthology of soccer writings that Galeano edited three decades ago and in which he praises soccer and those few who have written about it, laments that the game has not yet attracted the equivalent of Hemingway on the noble bulls, and chides those 'intellectuals who deny sentiments they are incapable of experiencing and, consequently, of sharing', especially those leftist intellectuals who point at soccer as 'the first and last cause of all evils, the source of the ignorance and resignation of the popular masses ... if it weren't for soccer [they think] the proletariat would acquire its necessary class consciousness and the revolution would erupt'. See, *Su majestad el fútbol*, Arca Editorial, Montevideo, 1968, quote from p. 5. Such characterisations are repeated in *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, pp. 33-34, where Galeano also mocks the scorn of those conservative intellectuals who maintain that soccer-worship is the religion the 'proles' deserve: 'The animal instinct overtakes human reason, ignorance crushes culture, and the riff-raff get what they want'.
- 3 Aldo Panfichi, et al., *Fútbol: identidad, violencia y racionalidad*, Facultad de Ciencias Sociales, Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, Lima, 1994, p. 8. Argentine Pablo Alabarces echoes the call for more serious analysis of sport within the academic community; see, '¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de deporte?', *Nueva Sociedad*, no. 154, 1998, pp. 74-86.
- 4 Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997.
- 5 Jeffrey Tobin, *Manly Acts: Buenos Aires*, 24 March 1996, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis,

- Rice University, 1998.
- 6 To sample Archetti's work, start with the following, and check the references: 'Argentinian Football: A Ritual of Violence?', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 9 no. 2, 1992, pp. 209-235; 'Masculinity and Football: The Formation of National Identity in Argentina', in *Game Without Frontiers: Football, Identity and Modernity*, eds., Richard Giulianotti and John Williams, Arena, Aldershot, 1994, pp. 225-243; 'In Search of National Identity: Argentinian Football and Europe', *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 12 no. 2, 1995, pp. 201-219; 'Playing Styles and Masculine Virtues in Argentine Football', in *Machos, Mistresses, Madonnas: Contesting the Power of Latin American Gender Imagery*, eds., Marit Melhuus and Kristi Anne Stolen, Verso, London, 1996, pp. 34-55. Much of this has been repeated and synthesised in *Masculinities: Football, Polo and the Tango in Argentina*, Berg, Oxford, 1999.
 - 7 Alan Klein, *Sugarball: The American Game, the Dominican Dream*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1991. More historical and less theoretical is Rob Ruck, *The Tropic of Baseball: Baseball in the Dominican Republic*, Meckler Publishing, Westport, 1991.
 - 8 Alan Klein, *Baseball on the Border: A Tale of Two Laredos*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1997. Because it is so transparent, because people, objects, images, and sentiments traverse it so easily, prize-winning Mexican novelist/essayist Carlos Fuentes calls it a crystal border. Carlos Fuentes, *The Crystal Frontier*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1998 [1995].
 - 9 See Note 2 above. A post-1998 World Cup updated edition has been announced.
 - 10 Galeano, *Soccer in Sun and Shadow*, pp. 2, 242-3, 244. Some of Galeano's ideas about the stifling impact of business, politics, and the media on the way soccer is played and the movement of players internationally, along with sympathy for or even a defence of Diego Maradona, are less exquisitely expressed by Argentine sociologist and journalist Sergio Levinsky. See, *El negocio del fútbol*, Ediciones Corregidor, Buenos Aires, 1995, and *Maradona: rebelde con causa*, Ediciones Corregidor, Buenos Aires, 1996. On the link between soccer styles and national character, see also Salman Rushdie, 'The People's Game: The Education of a Soccer Fan', *The New Yorker*, 31 May 1999, pp. 56-65.
 - 11 For more references on recent studies of Latin American sport, see Joseph L. Arben, *Latin American Sport: An Annotated Bibliography, 1988-1998*, Greenwood Press, Westport, 1999.
 - 12 Francis Fukuyama, 'The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order', *The Atlantic Monthly*, 5 May 1999, pp. 55-90; George Will, 'Fukuyama's theory confirmed, conclusion retracted', *The Greenville News*, 18 June 1999, p. 10A.
 - 13 David Fromkin, *The Way of the World From the Dawn of Civilizations to the Eve of the Twenty-first Century*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1999; William E. Everdell, 'Life, the Universe and Everything', *The New York Times Book Review*, 17 January 1999, p. 9.
 - 14 See the lament by sociologist/anthropologist Alan Klein, 1998-1999 President of the North American Society for the Sociology of Sport; 'President's Message', *NASSS Newsletter*, Winter 1999, p. 2.
 - 15 Douglas Booth, 'Sports History: What Can Be Done?' *Sport, Education and Society*, vol. 2, no. 2, 1997, pp. 191-204.
 - 16 See my review of Drew Hyland, *Philosophy of Sport*, Paragon House, New York, 1990, in *History of European Ideas*, vol. 17 no. 6, 1993, pp. 788-789. Partial exceptions are Allen Guttman, especially in his *Games and Empires: Modern Sports and Cultural Imperialism*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, and Alan Klein as cited above. Also, Bill Murray, *The World's Game: A History of Soccer*,

University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1996, and Tony Mason *Passion of the People? Football in South America*, Verso, London, 1995, though both are limited by sport and by area and neither attempts to build universal theory. But who in turn cites these works?

- 17 Reviewed on the H-NET List on Sport Literature, July 1997.
- 18 Another example of sports history/ethnography is John Sugden, *Boxing and Society: An International Analysis*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996, which looks at boxing in communities in Hartford (USA), Belfast (Northern Ireland), and Havana (Cuba).
- 19 See 'Sport History: Into the 21st Century', *Journal of Sport History*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1998, p. iii.
- 20 These and related references are found in my essay, '¿En el fútbol hay entendimiento?', paper presented at the XXI International Congress of the Latin American Studies Association, Chicago, 24-26 September, 1998.
- 21 Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist: A Story About Following Your Dream*, trans. Alan R. Clarke, HarperFlamingo, New York, 1998 [1988, 1993], p. 123.