

The Vanguard

THE SELECTION committee entered the Asociación Uruguaya headquarters. It was 14 June and they were confirming which 25 Uruguayans would prepare for the Campeonato Sudamericano in Buenos Aires. Organised by the Asociación Argentina, the tournament was set to celebrate the centenary of Argentine independence but it meant so much more. The Campeonato would show how far football had come, how deeply it had penetrated the continent's soul. Talk of centenaries and Buenos Aires still haunted the Uruguayans. For them, a repeat of the 1910 disaster had to be avoided, whatever the cost. And with Brazil joining Chile, Uruguay, and the hosts, the 1916 event would be the first true battle for South American football supremacy.

Opinion surrounding Uruguay's best team was close to unanimous. Cayetano Saporiti's place in goal was assured. With José Benincasa taking a break from the game, Alfredo Foglino would marshal the defence alongside Nacional team-mate Francisco Castellino. In midfield Peñarol's Manuel Varela and Jorge Pacheco were entrusted at left- and right-half respectively. With John Harley ineligible, the important position of centre-half remained undecided.

Then in attack, three names were undisputed: *El Maestro* José Piendibene at centre-forward, Ángel Romano at any position across the front five, and Isabelino Gradín at inside-left. That night selectors completed the attack with Pascual Somma and José Brachi. Wanderers' Alfredo Zibechi came in at centre-half. There was one glaring omission.

'Garderes is indignant,' said *El Plata*. 'Delgado, the great Delgado, the alma mater, the pillar, the bulwark, the wall of Central, has not even been chosen as a substitute for the B team.' Once again they had excluded Juan Delgado. Once again they had ignored his imperious domestic form, his unmatched ability. Anibal Garderes protested furiously. Did the selectors seriously not consider him one of Uruguay's 25 best players? If he had played for Nacional or Peñarol the situation would be different, the Central delegate claimed. Others suggested a graver reason. 'It seems to be racial hatred,' said *El Plata*. 'But no, it cannot be, for there is Isabelino, the great Isabelino.'

But on the eve of Uruguay's first practice, the great Isabelino stunned Montevideo's football world. And this time it *was* about racial hatred. He had not forgotten about the episode back in March, the comment from the 'Doctor' in the transfer commission about the colour of his skin. Now it was revealed that other officials had also made derogatory comments about Gradín. So now he was taking a stand. Now with the hopes of the nation resting on the tournament, on him, he decided to speak up about the mistreatment. And he did it by threatening to reject his Uruguay call-up in protest.

Instead of supporting the young star, the press played down Gradín's concerns. He was overreacting, said *El Telégrafo*. The official had merely asked a 'trick question', it was a 'joke and nothing but a joke'. It went on, advising the Peñarol forward 'as a true Uruguayan' to fulfil 'his

patriotic duties'. *La Razón* agreed, 'Gradín must play the Sudamericano ... One must put patriotism before such trivialities.' There were bigger things to worry about, they all said. Isabelino should be grateful for where he was, what he had. Yet for Gradín the incident wasn't a joke, far from trivial. For him and other racialised Uruguayans it was an everyday reality so he wouldn't stay silent. He wouldn't shut up and dribble. He wouldn't be afraid to put racism under the spotlight on the eve of Uruguay's most important footballing moment.

How officials privately responded to Gradín is unknown. Whatever it was, Isabelino lined up for Uruguay's starting XI in their first practice match at the Gran Parque Central. And to the delight of many, standing alongside John Harley in the opposing B team was Juan Delgado, a last-minute replacement for Bernardo Savio. Team A won 4-2, Gradín, Romano, and Piendibene all stood out, but their opponents stole the plaudits. The difference was in midfield. Harley put in a classy performance, the press lamenting that the bow-legged one had been born in Glasgow and not Montevideo. But he had a ready replacement in Delgado. 'What more could one hope for in a player of such notable conditions?' said *La Razón*.

In the second practice match the injustice continued. Delgado was excluded once again. Team A won easily but their performance caused worry. The weak link was at centre-half, Zibechi the liability. He lacked presence, he abused the long ball. He failed to provide that crucial support to the attacking five. Again, *La Razón* needed answers. 'Does the selection committee not believe that Delgado can easily replace him?'

For Uruguay's third and final practice, the Palermo man returned to the B team. A large crowd gathered at the Gran Parque Central, their sympathies for the underdogs

clear to see. And the Delgado/Harley midfield 'performed majestically' according to *El Plata*, their side scoring a resounding 3-1 win. And Delgado showed his class once again, nullifying Gradín and co and combining with intelligence and certainty. The fans gave him an imposing ovation. For the entire afternoon they agitated for his inclusion.

'The highlight,' said *La Tribuna Popular*, 'and, undoubtedly, the best on the field was Delgado.' Uruguay's first-choice centre-half had failed once again. 'Zibechi is not mature enough to carry out such an important role,' said *El Día*. Delgado, on the other hand, was at 'the peak of his career, and it can be affirmed that none of our players can rival him'. *La Razón* agreed. 'Zibechi did not convince anybody,' it said. 'His position, as we have already stated, must be taken by Delgado, who yesterday, as always, played admirably.'

The selection committee dug in their heels. That very night they ratified Uruguay's starting XI. The decision was so scandalous, so overwhelmingly against the will of the people. 'It is unforgivable,' said *El Día*. 'Delgado demonstrated that he is infinitely superior to Zibechi.'

The injustice of it all spurred some into action. River Plate delegate Roberto Mibelli, supported by colleagues from Reformers and Defensor, requested an extraordinary meeting to deal with the matter. On the very night Uruguay's players were set to depart for Buenos Aires, delegates gathered at the AUF headquarters. Selection committee member Reyes Lerena was conspicuous by his absence. The session took place behind closed doors and lasted for almost two hours. Héctor Gómez attempted to justify the committee's decision. At times 'violent' discussions took place. Then, towards the end of the meeting arrived a letter signed by Alfredo Zibechi. The

Wanderers player had recognised the overwhelming weight of public opinion. He recognised Delgado's superiority. So at the 11th hour, Zibechi saved the stubborn and shameless selection committee's blushes and resigned from the Uruguay team.

For *La Tribuna Popular*, it was 'what everyone wanted'. *El Plata* called it 'a triumph for the fans who from the first moment pleaded for the inclusion of Gradín's worthy colleague'. *El Día* summed it up: 'Delgado has been popularly consecrated.'

On 2 July, Uruguay and Chile opened the Campeonato Sudamericano at Gimnasia y Esgrima's Palermo ground. From the opening whistle *La Celeste* dominated with their rapid and precise combinations. Juan Delgado intercepted Chile's first attack with ease then imposed himself on the game, with José Piendibene opening the score just before half-time. Eleven minutes after the break, Isabelino Gradín doubled Uruguay's lead with a strong finish, before coolly heading in a Somma cross for the third. Then Piendibene rounded off the demolition in typical style, *El Maestro* dribbling past various opponents before beating the Chilean goalkeeper with a fierce drive. The game finished 4-0. Delgado and Gradín were the stars of the afternoon, earning admiration and applause from the local crowd.

El Mercurio's correspondent included Uruguay's Black stars in their match report, but the Chilean newspaper added one curious observation. The Chilean Football Association president, Juan Ortúzar, immediately cabled his compatriots in Buenos Aires: 'The newspapers here say the Uruguayan team contained African professionals. We hope that a formal complaint has been presented if such a claim is true.'

A celebration of continental peace and unity had begun with racial controversy. The Chilean journalist's claims shocked Buenos Aires and Montevideo. 'GRADÍN AND DELGADO ARE NOT AFRICANS' read *El Día's* headline. 'For the Chileans it seems that only in Africa can people of a dark colour be born,' said *La Democracia*. Those back home leapt to the defence of the young stars. 'The Café Caballero has lost its usual calm after the comments surrounding the "alleged African",' said *El Plata*. 'The *Centralistas* are proud of the performance of their idol Delgado.' The paper went on, condemning the Chileans and repeating praise for the two victims: 'Delgado and Gradín continue to be Uruguayan, *Orientales* ... They are the men of the day, the *cracks* of this congregation of the sporting representatives of the young continent.'

Yet there was something about the Uruguayan reaction. The outrage, the ridicule at the associations with Africa. *El Día* had quipped about the Chilean journalist's fear of cannibals. In their defence of their Black compatriots Uruguay seemed to reaffirm the country's whiteness, to deny and denigrate its African heritage. Delgado and Gradín's heritage. As if their descendants had not been forced across the Atlantic. As if their cultural expressions every summer were not based on real connections to the continent. For them, Delgado and Gradín were simply Uruguayan, a result of an inclusive and integrated and peaceful society in which the racial question had been resolved. As if Gradín had not threatened to quit the national team over racism just weeks ago.

'The Uruguayan team brings within their ranks two champions of colour,' said an unnamed Argentine paper, re-printed by an *El Plata* eager to boast about Uruguay's inclusiveness. 'There, racial differences have been erased forever, under the influence of nationality, which is a source

of pride for them.' The Argentines went on, praising the 'good sense' of the selectors for including Delgado and Gradín, unaware that for years they had ignored, excluded, and held back the former. Unaware that both had triumphed in spite of the barriers set before them.

Despite all its problems, through football Uruguay had made visible Latin America's Black past and present. In the midst of centenary celebrations, the Argentine paper could not but reflect on its own history. The exclusion of dark-skinned footballers like River Plate's José Morroni, Huracán's José Laguna, even a linesman called Capdevila, had betrayed the nation's Black heritage. 'The Black is as Argentine as the one born among silk lace,' the paper said, 'in a soft bed or comfortable shelter ... Do not forget the influence of Blacks in the struggles for independence; do not forget that on one of our great walks stands the proud, gallant statue of Falucho, who died heroically in Callao, wrapped in the folds of our immaculate flag, expressing between the death rattles of his martyrdom and as a hymn of eternal glory, "Long live Buenos Aires!"'

The Chileans had quickly distanced themselves from their rogue compatriot. Delegation president Héctor Arancibia Laso visited the Uruguayans to express his annoyance and rejection of the infamous telegram. He repeated such sentiments to *La Nación*, recognising Uruguay's victory as nothing less than the result of their clear superiority. Juan Ortúzar, who originally suggested an official protest, apologised for his comments and congratulated the victors. The controversy reached the highest diplomatic levels, with Chile's minister to Uruguay urging his compatriots to embark on a goodwill visit to Montevideo at the tournament's conclusion. And soon after the match, Chile captain Ramón Unzaga had asked Jorge Pacheco to play an informal practice, for a 'lesson

in scientific football'. Despite concerns back home about potential injury risks, the two sides faced off two days later, Uruguay's players reinforcing each Chilean line and teaching them the art of the combination.

Uruguay weren't the only team with a Black presence at the Campeonato. On 5 July, Arthur Friedenreich arrived in Montevideo with Brazil's 18-man squad. Their arduous week-long train journey to the Uruguayan capital was all a symbol. Only weeks earlier their participation had been in doubt, the sporting entities of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro at odds over which one would represent the nation at the tournament. The situation became so critical that foreign minister Lauro Müller intervened and negotiated a temporary settlement. Montevideo had celebrated. From early on the Uruguayans had pushed for a resolution. They knew that without Brazil the tournament would lose prestige, could not be truly called a South American Championship.

A large crowd greeted the Brazilians at Montevideo's Central Station. A Uruguayan delegation accompanied their guests to a banquet lunch, then on to the Gran Parque Central for a practice match. Over 5,000 fans were there for a glimpse of their next opponents. Nacional's Romano, Porte, Olivieri, and Scarone completed the teams. Brazilian and Uruguayan flags adorned the official stand and Brazil's minister to Montevideo took his place as special guest. And down below Friedenreich reminded locals of his talents by scoring a magnificent goal. At the post-game banquet, AUF president Blengio Roca toasted to 'American confraternity'. Then afterwards there was an imposing show of solidarity when over 7,000 Uruguayans accompanied their guests to the docks for their departure to Buenos Aires, the municipal band playing the anthems of the two sister nations.

On 9 July in Buenos Aires, delegations of all participating nations gathered for an extraordinary meeting.

Héctor Gómez stood. Four years he had waited for this moment, but now seemed a more fitting time than ever. Just a week ago those in the Old World had gone to battle at the Somme. Across the Atlantic peace was the only way. So Gómez called for South American football to unite, to consolidate, and to create the world's first continental football confederation. Delegates approved by acclamation the founding of the Confederación Sudamericana de Football, its creation to be ratified in Montevideo at the end of the year. Back home Uruguayans rejoiced in their compatriot's success.

The next day, Argentina were to face Brazil but the hosts were in trouble. Racing's Alberto Ohaco, scorer of two goals in the debut 6-1 win over Chile, found himself stranded hours away with work. A player short and with minutes until kick-off, officials scrambled for a replacement. After several unsuccessful attempts they were told to look in the popular stand. And there stood Huracán's José Laguna, the one who had been repeatedly shunned for the colour of his skin. Now, desperate, they pleaded for his services in one of the country's most important matches. Soon he was on the pitch wearing the *Albiceleste* in front of 15,000 fans. After ten minutes he had scored. Brazil fought back and equalised soon after, holding on for a shock 1-1 draw. Arthur Friedenreich was imperious, a constant menace to Juan Brown. 'The ground's best forward,' said *El Plata*. 'He's a director of the [attacking] line, with as much intelligence as formidable shots.'

The result served as a warning to Uruguay. They met their northern neighbour two days later and just eight minutes in the Brazilians went ahead. Friedenreich scored with a majestic effort, the forward dribbling through the entire defence and rounding Saporiti before putting the ball into an open net. The Argentine crowd celebrated a little too enthusiastically. Soon after, Piendibene violently

charged Orlando, the defender forced off the pitch leaving Brazil with ten men for the last 74 minutes. And they held on bravely until just before the hour, Isabelino Gradín equalising from a corner. Uruguay then went on the attack. They pummelled the Brazilian goal with shot after shot but Casimiro was a colossus. Then with 13 minutes remaining, the keeper parried a Piendibene shot into the path of Tognola, the Reformers forward scoring Uruguay's winning goal. Once again, Gradín was the player of the match. And once again, Delgado stood tallest in the middle. 'His performance is above all praise,' said *El Plata*. 'As usual, he was tenacious and determined in the moments in which his team were attacked; efficient and scientific when his forwards demanded his collaboration.'

Uruguay now faced Argentina in the final and deciding match. With the tournament's league format, *La Celeste* needed just a draw to be crowned South American champions. The day before the big game, a second-string Uruguay beat Chile 4-1 at the Gran Parque Central, the first meeting between the two countries in Montevideo. At half-time, Uruguay's Campeonato team appeared in the middle of the pitch to salute the 6,000-strong crowd. The most formidable ovation was reserved for Isabelino Gradín, a group of fans hoisting the star of the tournament on to their shoulders and carrying him off the field. Later on, an even larger crowd accompanied their heroes to the docks. Thousands more boarded steamers for the overnight crossing to Buenos Aires.

'We know how it feels to be so far away,' said *El Plata* on the eve of the final. 'We find ourselves engaged in an intense moment of enormous expectation, a transcendental moment where Uruguayan football's supremacy within South America is at play.' The paper called for heart and fight but reminded readers of the true purpose of the game,

something far beyond misunderstood sporting rivalries: 'The Campeonato Sudamericano pursues a broader, greater, more generous ideal: to identify in close embrace with all the representatives of the young continent, brothers of history and race.'

In Montevideo, thousands clamoured at various newspaper offices. The biggest crowd stood out front of *El Plata* near the Teatro Solís, forcing police to intervene to allow a steady flow of traffic. In the bars and cafés from Plaza Independencia to El Bajo, there was only one topic of conversation. Even those never concerned by football things could not but join the multitude with lively interest. The first telegraph updates began to appear.

'3pm: Great expectation reigns ... the attendance is at least 40,000 ... since midday the stands and terraces completely occupied.'

'3.30pm: The field was invaded by a large number of people, delaying the start of the match.'

'4pm: The police, after great efforts, has managed to clear the field.'

It was a sight without parallel in the history of South American football. Demand for the final game had been massive. Over 40,000 tickets had been sold for Gimnasia y Esgrima's 15-20,000-capacity ground. The opening whistle blew, Uruguay kicked off proceedings, and fans immediately burst on to the field. The referee found it impossible to safely proceed. Back in Montevideo, Uruguayans watched the updates trickle in.

'4pm: The match has been suspended. Barely started ... around 10,000 people impetuously invade the field ... the multitude immediately pull out the goalposts, destroying them ... the police attempt to contain, but, seeing their impotence, adopt a passive attitude ... the furious public destroys the terraces and popular stands.'

Projectiles flew in all directions. Still on the pitch, Cayetano Saporiti narrowly escaped a car part. In the main stand, Peñarol's José Pérez avoided tragedy when part of the structure fell centimetres away. The police dispersed most fans but at least 5,000 remained on the pitch. Supporters began piling up newspapers to set them alight. When that failed, others went to the cars outside and began to extract petrol.

'4.25pm: A fire starts in one of the popular stands. Spectators invade all parts. Terraces and barriers have been completely destroyed ... part of the crowd approaches the official stand.'

Gimnasia club members and others attempt to repel the invaders, throwing chairs and other objects below. Fans set the eastern stand alight. The one in the west followed. Stadium burning, firefighters finally arrive. Emergency services begin to attend to the many casualties. Broken limbs, lacerations, burns, smoke inhalation, a gunshot wound. One fan lost balance and fell off the eastern stand roof after attempting to kick down a flagpole.

Back in Montevideo confusion soon turned to anger. Understanding their compatriots were under attack, Uruguayan fans broke into spontaneous protests. Through the streets they marched, chanting anti-*Porteño* messages and calling for retribution. Some went straight to the Argentine legation and were intercepted by police. At 8.30pm, over 1,000 had gathered at the AUF headquarters. They demanded that Uruguay refuse to take the field for the next game. Héctor Gómez cabled his colleagues in Montevideo to clarify the situation, urging them to 'avoid an unfavourable atmosphere for good relations'. Roberto Mibelli emerged and reassured those below that Uruguay were not the targets of hostilities. The people calmed down but continued the next morning. At the docks a large

group received returning fans and non-competing players, marching again through the city streets before police intervened and dispersed the crowds.

It wasn't meant to be like this. The Campeonato Sudamericano was meant to represent unity and peace and continental solidarity. It was meant to introduce the New World as the centre of global civilisation. And now it ended in conflagration, in violence. Now they were no better than the Europeans.

The following day, 17 July, Uruguay and Argentina met at Racing Club's ground in Avellaneda. Tensions remained high. Organisers deployed a strict sale of 15,000 tickets. An immense police presence monitored the stadium and its surrounds. Ramón Ríos, the famous ex-River Plate personality now living in Buenos Aires, became caught up in it all. He had stepped in to assist a fan suffering police harassment but was himself detained and taken into custody. Even larger crowds returned to Montevideo's various newspaper offices.

The final replay began and it was a classic Argentina-Uruguay clash. Delgado and Gradín stood up to the occasion. With Ángel Romano a late withdrawal and José Piendibene more hard-working than playmaking, Gradín led the attacking line with tireless efforts on and off the ball, almost scoring off a header which hit the post. Delgado was 'a colossus', according to *El Plata*, the centre-half 'perhaps the most scientific man on the pitch'. It ended a 0-0 draw and Uruguay were South American champions.

'Montevideo has lived one of its most unforgettable and happy days,' said *La Tribuna Popular*. 'Few events have had the virtue of shaking the soul of the youth of the people, and few times like yesterday, Montevideo has been thrown on to the street with a single cry.' The press lauded *La Celeste*. They had performed against all odds, against all the

hostilities of a foreign land. But most of all, they had stayed true to their superior school of play. Their homogeneity, their class, and their precision had overcome the Argentines.

The next morning, the Uruguayan public gathered at the docks to receive their national heroes; 8,000 were there at 6am. By 8.30am the number had swelled to almost 10,000. Among the sea of fans flew the flags of Nacional, Peñarol, River Plate, and Wanderers, and hundreds of Uruguay and Brazil. The steamship *Viena* arrived. The Uruguayan and Brazilian delegations stepped on to land as their national anthems played.

El Plata called it a sight 'never foreseen in the annals of our sporting life'. Fans swarmed the players. They lifted Gradín, Piendibene, and Saporiti on to their shoulders. One group draped the goalkeeper in the Wanderers flag. From there they marched through the Old City streets, the players leading thick columns stretching blocks and bringing traffic to a standstill. 'HONOUR TO THE SOUTH AMERICAN CHAMPIONS' and 'URUGUAYANS: CULTURE IS OUR MOTTO' were among the banners on display. They reached the AUF headquarters where Roberto Mibelli and Héctor Gómez paid tribute to the champions. And after Brazil beat Uruguay in a friendly at the Gran Parque Central, a post-game banquet sounded the anthems of Uruguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. For a moment, the incidents at Gimnasia's ground were forgotten. Continental solidarity had been restored.

The following night, the Teatro Solís hosted a gala function in honour of the players. The largest and most passionate ovation was reserved for Isabelino Gradín, Campeonato top-scorer, transformed into a true football idol. The following night, Catalan baritone Emilio Sagi Barba – whose son Emili would debut for FC Barcelona the following year – performed for the footballers at the

Teatro Urquiza. For the next few weeks, Montevideo's clubs and fans lavished their national heroes with homage after homage.

And a month later, a group of friends and admirers hosted a banquet for Isabelino Gradín and Juan Delgado. 'This demonstration is organised purely by people of colour,' announced *La Tribuna Popular*. The two stars of the tournament had done their people proud. They had stood tall and thrived in a society that worked to keep them on the margins. They had overcome a tumultuous month of exclusions and abuse to make the Campeonato their own. Because of them Uruguay were South American champions.

Uruguay was at the vanguard of football and nation. The national team symbolised social inclusion, democracy, solidarity, in both personnel and style. *La Celeste's* tenacity and drive and success reflected the country's advances, its aspirations. The nation of the eight-hour work day (signed into law in 1915), pensions, accident insurance. The nation of free and secular education for all, of secondary schools in every department. The first welfare state of the Americas. A nation advancing in political rights, with suffrage extended to all men – still only men – while the secret ballot represented a victory for the Blancos.

On 30 July 1916, less than two weeks after the Campeonato Sudamericano, Uruguayans headed to the polls for the most democratic and significant elections in the nation's history. They were electing the individuals tasked with reforming Uruguay's constitution of 1830. The election also served as a referendum on José Batlle y Ordóñez's Colegiado, the Swiss-style plural executive. The people voted and the Blancos won 68,079 votes, the *Batllista* Colorados 60,420, anti-Colegiado Colorados 14,548. *Batllismo* had suffered its first defeat. It marked

the beginning of the 'Halt' under new president Feliciano Viera, a pause to the advanced reform agenda in place since 1911. But it was all a victory for the Uruguayan nation, for the strength of its democracy.

Not one month had passed since the Campeonato Sudamericano and Uruguay found itself in crisis. At the end of August Héctor Gómez had resigned from the selection committee. On 15 August Argentina won an international double-header, the Copa Lipton in Montevideo and the Copa Newton in Buenos Aires. In the Argentine capital there was tension throughout. In the morning the Uruguayans found themselves stranded at the docks; in the afternoon an altercation between Carlos Scarone and Argentines Ohaco and Marcovecchio led Uruguay's players to almost boycott the post-match banquet. In October another double-header saw Argentina win 1-0 in Montevideo and 7-2 in Buenos Aires. On that occasion the Uruguayans did receive attention at the docks, but in the form of abuse from around 100 La Boca locals.

The Argentines were calling it a new dawn for *Rioplatense* football. The pendulum had swung back in their favour, it was said. Club Nacional de Football would change all that. In December they set to face Racing Club for the Copa Río de la Plata, or Copa Aldao, a 'Super Cup' donated by the Gimnasia president to be played between the Uruguayan and Argentine league champions. Like 1903, Nacional were tasked to bring glory back to Uruguayan football, like they did the previous year with their *Rioplatense* double. But now, in 1916, they counted on a new young star who would go on to be the best player in the world.

Héctor Scarone was mad for Peñarol. In his brother's yellow and black shirt he played for fun with his friends, but