

# **soccer in sun and shadow**

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**V**  
**VERSO**

## author's confession

LIKE ALL Uruguayan children, I wanted to be a soccer player. I played quite well, in fact I was terrific, but only at night when I was asleep. During the day I was the worst wooden leg ever to set foot on the little soccer fields of my country.

As a fan I also left a lot to be desired. Juan Alberto Schiaffino and Julio César Abbadie played for Peñarol, the enemy team. I was a loyal Nacional fan and I did everything I could to hate them. But with his masterful passes “El Pepe” Schiaffino orchestrated the team’s plays as if he were watching from the highest tower of the stadium, and “El Pardo” Abbadie, running in his seven-league boots, would slide the ball all the way down the white touchline, swaying back and forth without ever grazing the ball or his opponents. I couldn’t help admiring them, and I even felt like cheering.

Years have gone by and I’ve finally learned to accept myself for who I am: a beggar for good soccer. I go about the world, hand outstretched, and in the stadiums I plead: “A pretty move, for the love of God.”

And when good soccer happens, I give thanks for the miracle and I don’t give a damn which team or country performs it.

## soccer

THE HISTORY of soccer is a sad voyage from beauty to duty. When the sport became an industry, the beauty that blossoms from the joy of play got torn out by its very roots. In this *fin-de-siècle* world, professional soccer condemns all that is useless, and useless means not profitable. Nobody earns a thing from that crazy feeling that for a moment turns a man into a child playing with a balloon, like a cat with a ball of yarn; a ballet dancer who romps with a ball as light as a balloon or a ball of yarn, playing without even knowing he's playing, with no purpose or clock or referee.

Play has become spectacle, with few protagonists and many spectators, soccer for watching. And that spectacle has become one of the most profitable businesses in the world, organized not for play but rather to impede it. The technocracy of professional sport has managed to impose a soccer of lightning speed and brute strength, a soccer that negates joy, kills fantasy and outlaws daring.

Luckily, on the field you can still see, even if only once in a long while, some insolent rascal who sets aside the script and commits the blunder of dribbling past the entire opposing side, the referee and the crowd in the stands, all for the carnal delight of embracing the forbidden adventure of freedom.



## the player

PANTING, he runs up the wing. On one side await the heavens of glory; on the other, ruin's abyss.

He's the envy of the neighborhood: the professional athlete who escaped the factory or the office and gets paid to have fun. He won the lottery. And even if he does have to sweat buckets, with no right to fatigue or failure, he gets into the papers and on TV, his name is on the radio, women swoon over him and children yearn to be like him. But he started out playing for pleasure in the dirt streets of the slums, and now he plays out of duty in stadiums where he has no choice but to win or to win.

Businessmen buy him, sell him, lend him; and he lets it all happen in return for the promise of more fame and more money. The more successful he is and the more money he makes, the more of a prisoner he becomes. Forced to live by military discipline, he suffers the punishing daily round of training and the bombardments of painkillers and cortisone to forget his aches and fool his body. And on the eve of big games, they lock him up in a concentration camp where he does forced labor, eats tasteless food, gets drunk on water and sleeps alone.

In other human trades, decline comes with old age, but a soccer player can be old at thirty. Muscles tire early: "That guy couldn't score if the field were on a slope."

"Him? Not even if they tied the goalie's hands."

Or before thirty if the ball knocks him out badly, or bad luck tears a muscle, or a kick breaks a bone so it can't be

fixed. And one rotten day the player discovers he has bet his life on a single card and his money is gone and so is his fame. Fame, that fleeting lady, didn't even leave him a Dear John letter.



## the goalkeeper

THEY ALSO call him doorman, keeper, goalie, bouncer or net-minder, but he could just as well be called martyr, pay-all, penitent or punching bag. They say where he walks, the grass never grows.

He's alone, condemned to watch the game from afar. Never leaving the goal, his only company the three posts, he awaits his own execution by firing squad. He used to dress in black, like the referee. Now the referee doesn't have to dress like a crow and the goalkeeper can populate his solitude with colorful fantasies.

He doesn't score goals, he's there to keep them from being scored. The goal is soccer's fiesta: the striker sparks delight and the goalkeeper, a wet blanket, snuffs it out.

He wears the number one on his back. The first to be pai? No, the first to pay. It's always the keeper's fault. And if it isn't, he still gets blamed. When any player commits a foul, he's the one who gets punished: they leave him there in the

immensity of the empty net, abandoned to face his executioner alone. And when the team has a bad afternoon, he's the one who pays the bill, expiating the sins of others under a rain of flying balls.

The rest of the players can blow it once in a while, or often, then redeem themselves with a spectacular dribble, a masterful pass, a well-placed volley. Not him. The crowd never forgives the keeper. Was he drawn out by a fake? Left looking ridiculous? Did the ball skid? Did his fingers of steel turn to silk? With a single slip-up the goalie can ruin a game or lose a championship, and the fans suddenly forget all his feats and condemn him to eternal disgrace. Damnation will follow him to the end of his days.



## the idol

AND ONE fine day the goddess of the wind kisses the foot of man, that mistreated, scorned foot, and from that kiss the soccer idol is born. He is born in a straw crib in a tin-roofed shack and he enters the world clinging to a ball.

From the moment he learns to walk, he knows how to play. In his early years he brings joy to the sandlots, plays like crazy in the back alleys of the slums until night falls and you can't see the ball, and in his early manhood he takes flight and the stadiums

fly with him. His acrobatic art draws multitudes, Sunday after Sunday, from victory to victory, ovation to ovation.

The ball seeks him out, knows him, needs him. She rests and rocks on the top of his foot. He caresses her and makes her speak, and in that tête-à-tête millions of mutes converse. The nobodies, those condemned to always be nobodies, feel they are somebodies for a moment by virtue of those one-two passes, those dribbles that draw Z's on the grass, those incredible backheel goals or overhead volleys. When he plays, the team has twelve players: "Twelve? It has fifteen! Twenty!"

The ball laughs, radiant, in the air. He brings her down, puts her to sleep, showers her with compliments, dances with her, and seeing such things never before seen his admirers pity their unborn grandchildren who will never see them.

But the idol is an idol for only a moment, a human eternity, all of nothing; and when the time comes for the golden foot to become a lame duck, the star will have completed his journey from sparkle to blackout. His body has more patches than a clown's suit, and by now the acrobat is a cripple, the artist a beast of burden: "Not with your clodhoppers!"

The fountain of public adulation becomes the lightning rod of public rancor: "You mummy!"

Sometimes the idol doesn't fall all at once. And sometimes when he breaks, people devour the pieces.

## the fan

ONCE A WEEK, the fan flees his house and goes to the stadium.

Banners wave and the air resounds with noisemakers, firecrackers and drums, it rains streamers and confetti. The city disappears, its routine forgotten, all that exists is the temple. In this sacred place, the only religion without atheists puts its divinities on display. Although the fan can contemplate the miracle more comfortably on TV, he prefers to make the pilgrimage to this spot where he can see his angels in the flesh doing battle with the demons of the day.

Here the fan shakes his handkerchief, gulps his saliva, swallows his bile, eats his cap, whispers prayers and curses and suddenly breaks out in an ovation, leaping like a flea to hug the stranger at his side cheering the goal. While the pagan mass lasts, the fan is many. Along with thousands of other devotees he shares the certainty that we are the best, that all referees are crooked, that all the adversaries cheat.

Rarely does the fan say: "My club plays today." Rather he says: "We play today." He knows it's "player number twelve" who stirs up the winds of fervor that propel the ball when she falls asleep, just as the other eleven players know that playing without their fans is like dancing without music.

When the game is over, the fan, who has not moved from the stands, celebrates *his* victory: "What a goal we scored," "What a beating we gave them." Or he cries over *his* defeat: "They swindled us again," "Thief of a referee." And then the sun goes down and so does the fan. Shadows fall over the emptying stadium. On the concrete terracing, a few fleeting bonfires



burn, while the lights and voices fade. The stadium is left alone and the fan, too, returns to his solitude: to the I who had been we. The fan goes off, the crowd breaks up and melts away, and Sunday becomes as melancholy as Ash Wednesday after the death of carnival.



## the fanatic

THE FANATIC is a fan in a madhouse. His mania for denying all evidence finally upended whatever once passed for his mind, and the remains of the shipwreck spin about aimlessly in waters whipped by a fury that gives no quarter.

The fanatic shows up at the stadium wrapped in the team flag, his face painted the colors of their beloved shirts, prickling with strident and aggressive paraphernalia, and on the way he makes a lot of noise and a lot of fuss. He never comes alone. In the midst of the rowdy crowd, dangerous centipede, this cowed man will cow others, this frightened man becomes frightening. Omnipotence on Sunday exorcises the obedient life he leads the rest of the week: the bed with no desire, the job with no calling or no job at all. Liberated for a day, the fanatic has much to avenge.

In an epileptic fit he watches the game but doesn't see it. His arena is the stands. They are his battleground. The mere

presence of a fan of the other side constitutes an inexcusable provocation. Good isn't violent by nature, but Evil leaves it no choice. The enemy, always in the wrong, deserves a good thrashing. The fanatic cannot let his mind wander because the enemy is everywhere, even in that quiet spectator who at any moment might offer the opinion that the rival team is playing fair; then he'll get what he deserves.



## the goal

THE GOAL is soccer's orgasm. And like orgasms, goals have become an ever less frequent occurrence in modern life.

Half a century ago, it was a rare thing for a game to end scoreless: 0-0, two open mouths, two yawns. Now, the eleven players spend the entire game hanging from the crossbars, trying to stop goals, and have no time to score them.

The excitement unleashed whenever the white bullet makes the net ripple might appear mysterious or crazy, but remember the miracle doesn't happen very often. The goal, even if it be a little one, is always a gooooooooooooooooooooooal in the throat of the commentators, a "do" sung from the chest that would leave Caruso forever mute, and the crowd goes nuts and the stadium forgets that it's made of concrete and breaks free of the earth and flies through the air.

## the referee

IN SPANISH he's the *árbitro* and he's arbitrary by definition. An abominable tyrant who runs his dictatorship without opposition, a pompous executioner who exercises his absolute power with an operatic flourish. Whistle between his lips, he blows the winds of inexorable fate either to allow a goal or to disallow one. Card in hand, he raises the colors of doom: yellow to punish the sinner and oblige him to repent, and red to force him into exile.

The linesmen, who assist but do not rule, look on from the side. Only the referee steps onto the playing field, and he's absolutely right to cross himself when he first appears before the roaring crowd. His job is to make himself hated. The only universal sentiment in soccer: everybody hates him. He always gets catcalls, never applause.

No one runs more. The only one obliged to run the entire game without pause, this interloper who pants in the ears of every player breaks his back galloping like a horse. And in return for his pains, the crowd howls for his head. From beginning to end he sweats oceans, forced to chase the white ball that skips along back and forth between the feet of everyone else. Of course he'd love to play, but never has he been offered that privilege. When the ball hits him by accident, the entire stadium curses his mother. But even so, just to be there in that sacred green space where the ball floats and glides, he's willing to suffer insults, catcalls, stones and damnation.

Sometimes, though rarely, his judgment coincides with the inclinations of the fans, but not even then does he emerge

unscathed. The losers owe their loss to him and the winners triumph in spite of him. Scapegoat for every error, cause of every misfortune, the fans would have to invent him if he didn't already exist. The more they hate him, the more they need him.

For over a century the referee dressed in mourning. For whom? For himself. Now he wears bright colors to mask his feelings.



## the manager

IN THE OLD days there was the trainer and nobody paid him much heed. He died without a word when the game stopped being a game and professional soccer required a technocracy to keep people in line. Then the manager was born. His mission: to prevent improvisation, restrict freedom and maximize the productivity of the players, who were now obliged to become disciplined athletes.

The trainer used to say: "Let's play."

The manager says: "Let's go to work."

Today they talk in numbers. The history of soccer in the twentieth century, a journey from daring to fear, is a trip from the 2-3-5 to the 5-4-1 by way of the 4-3-3 and the 4-4-2. Any ignoramus could translate that much with a little help, but the rest is impossible. The manager dreams up formulas

as mysterious as the Immaculate Conception, and he uses them to develop tactical schemes more indecipherable than the Holy Trinity.

From the old blackboard to the electronic screen: now great plays are planned by computer and taught by video. These dream-maneuvers are rarely seen in the broadcast version of the games. Television prefers to focus on the furrows in the manager's brow. We see him gnawing his fists or shouting instructions that would certainly turn the game around if anyone could understand them.

Journalists pepper him with questions at the post-game press conference, but he never reveals the secrets of his victories, although he formulates admirable explanations of his defeats. "The instructions were clear, but they didn't listen," he says when the team suffers a big defeat to a crummy rival. Or he talks about himself in the third person to dispel any doubts, more or less like this: "The reverses the team suffered today will never mar the achievement of a conceptual clarity that this manager once described as a synthesis of the many sacrifices required to become truly effective."

The machinery of spectacle grinds up everything in its path, nothing lasts very long, and the manager is as disposable as any other product of consumer society. Today the crowd screams, "Never die!" and next Sunday they invite him to kill himself.

The manager believes soccer is a science and the field a laboratory, but the genius of Einstein and the subtlety of Freud isn't enough for the owners and the fans. They want a miracle-worker like the Virgin of Lourdes, with the stamina of Gandhi.

## the theater

THE PLAYERS in this show act with their legs for an audience of thousands or millions who watch from the stands or their living rooms with their souls on edge. Who writes the play—the manager? This play mocks its author, unfolding as it pleases and according to the actors' abilities. It definitely depends on fate, which like the wind blows every which way. That's why the outcome is always a surprise to spectators and protagonists alike, except in cases of bribery or other inescapable tricks of destiny.

How many small theaters inhabit the great theater of soccer? How many stages fit inside that rectangle of green grass? Not all players act with their legs alone. Some are masterful actors in the art of tormenting their fellow players. Wearing the mask of a saint incapable of harming a fly, such a man will spit at his opponent, insult him, push him, throw dirt in his eyes, give him a well-placed elbow to the chin, dig another into his ribs, pull his hair or his shirt, step on his foot when he stops or his hand when he's down—and all behind the referee's back, while the linesman contemplates the passing clouds.

Some are wizards in the art of gaining advantage. Wearing the mask of a poor sad-sack who looks like an imbecile but is really an idiot, such a player will take a penalty, a free kick or a throw-in several leagues beyond the point indicated by the referee. And when he has to form a wall, he glides over to the spot very slowly, without lifting his feet, until the magic carpet deposits him right on top of the player about to kick the ball.



There are actors unsurpassed in the art of wasting time. Wearing the mask of a recently crucified martyr, such a player rolls in agony, clutching his knee or his head, and then lies prone on the grass. Minutes pass. At a snail's pace out comes the fat masseur, the holy-hand, running with sweat, smelling of liniment, wearing a towel around his neck and carrying a flask in one hand and some infallible potion in the other. Hours go by, years go by, until the referee orders them to take that corpse off the field. Suddenly, up jumps the player, whoosh, and the miracle of resurrection occurs.



## the specialists

BEFORE THE GAME, the reporters formulate their disconcerting question: "Are you ready to win?"

And they obtain an astonishing answer: "We will do everything possible to obtain victory."

Later, the broadcasters take the floor. TV anchors just keep the images company, they know they can't compete. Radio commentators, on the other hand, are a less faint-hearted breed. These masters of suspense do more running than the players and more skidding than the ball itself. With dizzying speed they describe a game that bears little resemblance to the one you're watching. In that waterfall of words

the shot you see scraping the sky is actually grazing the crossbar, and the net where a spider placidly spins her web from post to post while the goalkeeper yawns is facing an imminent goal.

When the vibrant day is over in the concrete colossus, it is the critics' turn. Already they have interrupted the broadcast several times to tell the players what to do, but the players didn't listen because they were too busy making mistakes. These ideologues of the WM formation against the MW, which is the same thing but backwards, use a language where scientific erudition alternates with war propaganda and lyrical ecstasy. And they always speak in the plural, because they are many.



## the language of soccer doctors

LET'S SUM UP our point of view, formulating a first approximation of the tactical, technical and physical problems of the contest waged this afternoon on the field of the Unidos Venceremos Soccer Club without turning to simplifications incompatible with this topic, which without a doubt demands a more profound and detailed analysis, and without resorting to ambiguities which have been, are and always will be alien to our lifelong dedication to serving the sporting public.



It would be easy for us to evade our responsibility and attribute the home team's setback to the restrained performance of its players, but the excessive sluggishness they undeniably demonstrated in today's game each time they received the ball in no way justifies, understand me well ladies and gentlemen, *in no way* justifies such a generalized and therefore unjust critique. No, no, and no. Conformity is not our style, as those of you who have followed us during the long years of our career well know, not only in our beloved country but on the stages of international and even worldwide sport, wherever we have been called upon to fulfill our humble duty. So, as is our custom, we are going to pronounce all the syllables of every word: the organic potential of the game-plan pursued by this struggling team has not been crowned with success simply and plainly because the team continues to be incapable of adequately channelling its expectations for greater offensive projection in the direction of the enemy goal. We said as much only this past Sunday and we affirm it today, with our head held high and without any hairs on our tongue, because we have always called a spade a spade and we will continue speaking the truth, though it hurts, fall who may, and no matter the cost.



## choreographed war

IN SOCCER, ritual sublimation of war, eleven men in shorts are the sword of the neighborhood, the city or the nation. These warriors without weapons or armor exorcize the demons of the crowd and reaffirm its faith: in each confrontation between two sides, old hatreds and old loves passed from father to son enter into combat.

The stadium has towers and banners like a castle, as well as a deep and wide moat around the field. In the middle, a white line separates the territories in dispute. At each end stand the goals to be bombed with flying balls. The area directly in front of the goals is called the "danger zone."

In the center circle, the captains exchange pennants and shake hands as the ritual demands. The referee blows his whistle and the ball, another whistling wind, is set in motion. The ball travels back and forth, a player traps her and takes her for a ride until he's pummeled in a tackle and falls spread-eagled. The victim does not rise. In the immensity of the green expanse, the player lies prostrate. From the immensity of the stands, voices thunder. The enemy crowd emits a friendly roar:

*"¡Que se muera!"*

*"Devi morire!"*

*"Tuez-le!"*

*"Mach ihn nieder!"*

*"Let him die!"*

*"Kill kill kill!"*

## the language of war

UTILIZING A competent tactical variant of their planned strategy, our squad leapt to the charge, surprising the enemy unprepared. It was a brutal attack. When the home troops invaded enemy territory, our battering ram opened a breach in the most vulnerable flank of the defensive wall and infiltrated the danger zone. The artillery man received the projectile and with a skillful manoeuvre he got into shooting position, reared back for the kill and brought the attack to culmination with a cannonball that annihilated the guard. Then the defeated sentry, custodian of the bastion that had appeared unassailable, fell to his knees with his face in his hands while the executioner who shot him raised his arms to the cheering crowd.

The enemy did not retreat, but its stampedes never managed to sow panic in the home trenches, and time and again they crashed against our well-armored rearguard. Their men were shooting with wet powder, reduced to impotence by the gallantry of our gladiators, who battled like lions. When two of ours were knocked out of the fight, the crowd called in vain for the maximum sentence, but such atrocities fit for war and disrespectful of the gentlemanly rules of the noble sport of soccer continued with impunity.

At last, when the deaf and blind referee called an end to the contest, a well-deserved whistle discharged the defeated squad. Then the victorious people invaded the redoubt to hoist on their shoulders the eleven heroes of this epic gest, this grand feat, this great exploit that cost us so much blood,

sweat and tears. And our captain, wrapped in the standard of our fatherland that will never again be soiled by defeat, raised up the trophy and kissed the great silver cup. It was the kiss of glory!



## the stadium

HAVE YOU ever entered an empty stadium? Try it. Stand in the middle of the field and listen. There is nothing less empty than an empty stadium. There is nothing less mute than the stands bereft of people.

At Wembley, shouts from the '66 World Cup which England won still resound, and if you listen very closely you can hear groans from 1953 when England fell to the Hungarians. Montevideo's Centenario Stadium sighs with nostalgia for the glory days of Uruguayan soccer. Maracanã is still crying over Brazil's 1950 World Cup defeat. At Bombonera in Buenos Aires, drums boom from half a century ago. From the depths of Azteca Stadium, you can hear the ceremonial chants of the ancient Mexican ball game. The concrete terraces of Camp Nou in Barcelona speak Catalán, and the stands of San Mamés in Bilbao talk in Euskera. In Milan, the ghost of Giuseppe Meazza scores goals that shake the stadium bearing his name. The final of the '74 World Cup, won by Germany, is played day after day

and night after night at Munich's Olympic Stadium. The stadium of King Fahad in Saudi Arabia has marble and gold boxes and carpeted stands, but it has no memory or much of anything to say.



## the ball

THE CHINESE used a ball made of leather and filled with hemp. In the time of the Pharaohs the Egyptians used a ball made of straw or the husks of seeds, wrapped in colorful cloths. The Greeks and Romans used an ox bladder, inflated and sewn shut. Europeans of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance played with an oval-shaped ball filled with horsehair. In America the ball was made of rubber and bounced like nowhere else. The chroniclers of the Spanish court tell how Hernán Cortés bounced a Mexican ball high in the air before the bulging eyes of Emperor Charles.

The rubber chamber, swollen with air and covered with leather, was born in the middle of the last century thanks to the genius of Charles Goodyear, an American from Connecticut. And long after that, thanks to the genius of Tossolini, Valbonesi and Polo, three Argentines from Córdoba, the lace-free ball was born. They invented a chamber with a valve inflated by injection, and ever since the 1938 World Cup it has been possible to

head the ball without getting hurt by the laces that used to tie it together.

Until the middle of this century, the ball was brown. Then white. In our days it comes in different patterns of black on a white background. Now it has a waist of sixty centimeters and is dressed in polyurethane on polyethylene foam. Waterproof, it weighs less than half a kilo and travels more quickly than the old leather ball, which on rainy days barely moved.

They call it by many names: the sphere, the round, the tool, the globe, the balloon, the projectile. In Brazil no one doubts the ball is a woman. Brazilians call her pudgy, *gorduchinha*, or baby, *menina*, and they give her names like Maricota, Leonor or Margarita.

Pelé kissed her in Maracanã when he scored his thousandth goal and Di Stéfano built her a monument in front of his house, a bronze ball with a plaque that says: *Thanks, old girl*.

She is loyal. In the final game of the 1930 World Cup, both teams insisted on playing with their own ball. Sage as Solomon, the referee decided that the first half would be played with the Argentine ball and the second with the Uruguayan ball. Argentina won the first half, and Uruguay the second. The ball can also be fickle sometimes, refusing to enter the goal because she changes her mind in midflight and curves away. You see, she is easily offended. She can't stand getting kicked around or hit out of spite. She insists on being caressed, kissed, lulled to sleep on the chest or the foot. She is proud, vain perhaps, and she's not lacking a motive: she knows all too well that when she rises gracefully she brings joy to many hearts, and many a heart is crushed when she lands without style.

## the origins

IN SOCCER, as in almost everything else, the Chinese were first. Five thousand years ago, Chinese jugglers had balls dancing on their feet, and it wasn't long before they organized the first games. The net was in the center of the field and the players had to keep the ball from touching the ground without using their hands. The sport continued from dynasty to dynasty, as can be seen on certain bas-relief monuments from long before Christ, and in later Ming Dynasty engravings which show people playing with a ball that could have been made by Adidas.

We know that in ancient times the Egyptians and the Japanese had fun kicking a ball around. On the marble surface of a Greek tomb from five centuries before Christ a man is kneeling a ball. The comedies of Antiphanes contain telling expressions like *long ball*, *short pass*, *forward pass*. . . . They say that Emperor Julius Caesar was quick with his feet, and that Nero couldn't score at all. In any case, there is no doubt that while Jesus lay dying on the cross the Romans were playing something fairly similar to soccer.

Roman legionaries kicked the ball all the way to the British Isles. Centuries later, in 1314, King Edward II stamped his seal on a royal decree condemning the game as plebeian and riotous: "Forasmuch as there is a great noise in the city caused by hustling over large balls, from which many evils may arise, which God forbid." Football, as it was already being called, left a slew of victims. Matches were fought by gangs, and there were no limits on the number of players, the

length of the game or anything else. An entire town would play against another town, advancing with kicks and punches toward the goal, which at that time was a far-off windmill. The games extended over several leagues and several days at the cost of several lives. Kings repeatedly outlawed these bloody events: in 1349, Edward III included soccer among games that were "stupid and utterly useless," and there were edicts against the game signed by Henry IV in 1410 and Henry VI in 1447. These only confirmed that prohibition whets the appetite, because the more it was banned, the more it was played.

In 1592 in *The Comedy of Errors*, Shakespeare turned to soccer to formulate a character's complaint: "Am I so round with you as you with me, / that like a football you do spurn me thus? / You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither. / If I last in this service you must case me in leather." And a few years later in *King Lear*, the Earl of Kent taunted: "Nor tripped neither, you base football player!"

In Florence soccer was called *calcio* as it still is throughout Italy. Leonardo da Vinci was a fervent fan and Machiavelli loved to play. It was played in sides of twenty-seven men split into three lines, and they were allowed to use their hands and feet to hit the ball and gouge the bellies of their adversaries. Throngs of people attended the matches, which were held in the largest plazas and on the frozen waters of the Arno. Far from Florence, in the gardens of the Vatican, Popes Clement VII, Leo IX and Urban VIII used to roll up their vestments to play *calcio*.

In Mexico and Central America a rubber ball filled in for the sun in a sacred ceremony performed as far back as 1500 BC.

But we don't know when soccer began in many parts of the Americas. The Indians of the Bolivian Amazon say they have been kicking a hefty rubber ball between two posts since time immemorial. In the eighteenth century, a Spanish priest from the Jesuit missions of the Upper Paraná described an ancient custom of the Guaraníes: "They do not throw the ball with their hands like us, rather they propel it with the upper part of their bare foot." Among the Indians of Mexico and Central America, the ball was generally hit with the hip or the forearm, although paintings at Teotihuacán and Chichén-Itzá show the ball being kicked with the foot and the knee. A mural created over a thousand years ago in Tepantitla has a grandfather of Hugo Sánchez manoeuvring the ball with his left. The game would end when the ball approached its destination: the sun arrived at dawn after travelling through the region of death. Then, for the sun to rise, blood would flow. According to some in the know, the Aztecs had the habit of sacrificing the winners. Before cutting off their heads, they painted red stripes on their bodies. The chosen of the gods would offer their blood, so the earth would be fertile and the heavens generous.



## the rules of the game

AFTER SO MANY centuries of official denial, the British Isles finally accepted the ball in its destiny. Under Queen Victoria soccer was embraced not only as a plebeian vice, but as an aristocratic virtue.

The future leaders of society learned how to win by playing soccer in the courtyards of colleges and universities. There, upper-class pups unbosomed their youthful ardors, honed their discipline, tempered their anger and sharpened their wits. At the other end of the social scale, the workers had no need to test the limits of their bodies, since that's what factories and workshops were for, but the fatherland of industrial capitalism discovered that soccer, passion of the masses, offered entertainment and consolation to the poor and distraction from thoughts of strikes and other evils.

In its modern form, soccer comes from a gentleman's agreement signed by twelve English clubs in the autumn of 1863 in a London tavern. The clubs agreed to abide by rules established in 1846 by the University of Cambridge. At Cambridge soccer divorced rugby: carrying the ball with your hands was outlawed, although touching it was allowed, and kicking the adversary was also prohibited. "Kicks must be aimed only at the ball," warned one rule. A century and a half later some players still confuse the ball with their rival's skull, owing to the similarity in shape.

The London accord put no limit on the number of players, or the size of the field, or the height of the goal, or the length of the game. Games lasted two or three hours and the protag-



onists chatted and smoked whenever the ball was flying in the distance. One modern rule was established: the off-side. It was disloyal to score goals behind the adversary's back.

In those days no one played a particular position on the field: they all ran happily after the ball, each wherever he wanted, and everyone changed positions at will. It fell to Scotland, in around 1870, to organize teams with defense, midfielders and strikers. By then sides had eleven players. From 1869 on, none of them could touch the ball with their hands, not even to catch and drop it to kick. In 1871 the exception to that taboo was born: the goalkeeper could use his entire body to defend the goal.

The goalkeeper protected a square redoubt narrower than today's and much higher. It consisted of two posts joined by a belt, five and a half meters off the ground. The belt was replaced by a wooden crossbar in 1875. Goals were literally scored on the posts with a small notch. Today goals are registered on electronic scoreboards but the expression "to score a goal" stuck. In some countries we call the goalmouth the *arco*, and the one who defends it the *arquero*, even though it's all right angles and not an arch at all, perhaps because students at English colleges used courtyard arches for goals.

In 1872 the referee made his appearance. Until then the players were their own judges, and they themselves sanctioned any fouls committed. In 1880, chronometer in hand, the referee became the judge of when the game was over and when anyone should be sent off, though he still ran things by shouting from the sidelines. In 1891 the referee stepped onto the playing field for the first time, blowing a whistle to call



the first penalty kick in history and walking twelve paces to indicate the spot where it was to be taken. For some time the British press had been campaigning in favor of penalties because the players needed some protection in front of the goal, which was the scene of incredible butchery. A hair-raising list of players killed and bones broken had been published in the *Westminster Gazette*.

In 1882 English authorities allowed the throw-in. Eight years later the areas of the field were marked with lime and a circle was drawn in the center. That same year the goal gained a net to trap the ball and erase any doubts about whether a goal had been scored.

After that the century died, and with it the British monopoly. In 1904, FIFA was born, the Fédération Internationale de Football Associations, which has governed relations between ball and foot throughout the world ever since. Through all the world championships held since, few changes have been made to the British rules which first organized the sport.



## the english invasions

OUTSIDE THE MADHOUSE, in an empty lot in Buenos Aires, several blond boys were kicking a ball around.

"Who are they?" asked a child.

"Crazy people," answered his father. "Crazy English."

Journalist Juan José de Soiza Reilly remembers this from his childhood. At first, soccer seemed like a crazy man's game in the River Plate. But with the expansion of the Empire, soccer became an export as typically British as Manchester cloth, railways, loans from Barings or the doctrine of free trade. It arrived on the feet of sailors who played by the dikes of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, while Her Majesty's ships unloaded blankets, boots and flour, and took on wool, hides and wheat to make more blankets, boots and flour on the other side of the world. English citizens, diplomats and managers of railway and gas companies, formed the first local teams. The English of Montevideo and Buenos Aires staged Uruguay's first international competition in 1889, under a gigantic portrait of Queen Victoria, her eyes lowered in a mask of disdain. Another portrait of the queen of the seas watched over the first Brazilian soccer game in 1895, played between the British subjects of the Gas Company and the São Paulo Railway.

Old photographs show these pioneers in sepia tones. They were warriors trained for battle. Cotton and wool armor covered their entire bodies so as not to offend the ladies in attendance, who unfurled silk parasols and waved lace handkerchiefs. The only flesh the players exposed were their serious faces peering out from behind wax-twirled mustaches below caps or hats. Their feet were shod with heavy Mansfield shoes.

It didn't take long to become contagious. Sooner rather than later, the native-born gentlemen of local society started

playing that crazy English game. They imported from London the shirts, shoes, thick ankle-socks and shorts which reached from the chest to below the knee. Balls no longer confounded customs officers, who at first hadn't known how to classify the species. Ships also brought rule books to these far-off coasts of southern America, and with them came words which remained for many years to come: *field, score, goal, goalkeeper, back, half, forward, out-ball, penalty, off-side*. A "foul" merited punishment by the "referee," but the aggrieved player could accept an apology from the guilty party "as long as his apology was sincere and was expressed in correct English," according to the first soccer rule book that circulated in the River Plate.

Meanwhile, other English words were being incorporated into the speech of Latin American countries in the Caribbean: *pitcher, catcher, innings*. Having fallen under U.S. influence, these countries learned to hit a ball with a rounded wooden bat. The Marines shouldered bats next to their rifles when they imposed imperial order on the region by blood and fire. Baseball became for the people of the Caribbean what soccer is for us.





## creole soccer

THE ARGENTINE football association did not allow Spanish to be spoken at the meetings of its directors, and the Uruguay Association Football League outlawed Sunday games because it was British custom to play on Saturday. But by the first years of the century, soccer was becoming popular and nationalized on the shores of the River Plate. This diversion, first imported to entertain the lazy offspring of the well-off, had escaped from its high window-box, came to earth and was setting down roots.

The process was unstoppable. Like the tango, soccer blossomed in the slums. It required no money and could be played with nothing more than sheer desire. In fields, in alleys and on beaches, native-born kids and young immigrants improvised games using balls made of old socks filled with rags or paper, and a couple of stones for a goal. Thanks to the language of the game, which soon became universal, workers driven out of the countryside could communicate perfectly well with workers driven out of Europe. The Esperanto of the ball connected poor Creoles with peons who had crossed the sea from Vigo, Lisbon, Naples, Beirut or Besarabia with their dreams of "*hacer la América*"—making a new world by building, carrying, baking or sweeping. Soccer had made a lovely voyage: first organized in the colleges and universities of England, it brought joy to the lives of South Americans who had never set foot in a school.

On the fields of Buenos Aires and Montevideo, a style was born. A home-grown way of playing soccer, like the

home-grown way of dancing which was being invented in the milonga clubs. Dancers drew filigrees on a single floor tile, and soccer players created their own language in that tiny space where they chose to retain and possess the ball rather than kick it, as if their feet were hands braiding the leather. On the feet of the first Creole *virtuosos el toque*, the touch, was born: the ball was strummed as if it were a guitar, a source of music.

At the same time, soccer was being tropicalized in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo by the poor who enriched it while they appropriated it. No longer the possession of the few comfortable youths who played by copying, this foreign sport became Brazilian, fertilized by the creative energies of the people discovering it. And thus was born the most beautiful soccer in the world, made of hip feints, undulations of the torso and legs in flight, all of which came from *capoeira*, the warrior dance of black slaves, and from the joyful dances of the big-city slums.

As soccer became a popular passion and revealed its hidden beauty, it disqualified itself as a dignified pastime. In 1915 the democratization of soccer drew complaints from the Rio de Janeiro magazine *Sports*: "Those of us who have a certain position in society are obliged to play with workers, with drivers. . . . The playing of sports is becoming an agony, a sacrifice, never a diversion."



## the story of fla and flu

1912 saw the first classic in the history of Brazilian soccer: the first Fla-Flu. Fluminense beat Flamengo 3-2.

The match was active and violent, causing numerous fainting spells among the spectators. The boxes were festooned with flowers, fruits, feathers, drooping ladies and raucous gentlemen. While the gentlemen celebrated each goal by throwing their straw hats onto the playing field, the ladies let their fans fall and collapsed from the excitement of the goal or the oppression of heat and corset.

Flamengo had been born not long before, when Fluminense split in two after much saber rattling and many labor pains. Soon the father was sorry he hadn't strangled this smart aleck of a son in the crib, but it was too late. Fluminense had spawned its own curse and nothing could be done.

From then on, father and son—rebellious son, abandoned father—dedicated their lives to hating each other. Each Fla-Flu classic is a new battle in a war without end. The two love the same city, lazy, sinful Rio de Janeiro, a city that languidly lets herself be loved, toying with both and surrendering to neither. Father and son play for the lover who plays with them. For her they battle, and she attends each duel dressed for a party.



## the opiate of the people?

How is soccer like God? Each inspires devotion among believers and distrust among intellectuals.

In 1902 in London, Rudyard Kipling made fun of soccer and those who contented their souls with "the muddled oafs at the goals." Three-quarters of a century later in Buenos Aires, Jorge Luis Borges was more subtle: he gave a lecture on the subject of immortality on the same day and at the same hour that Argentina was playing its first game in the '78 World Cup.

The scorn of many conservative intellectuals comes from their belief that soccer-worship is exactly the religion people deserve. Possessed by soccer, the proles think with their feet, which is the only way they can think, and through such primitive ecstasy they fulfill their dreams. The animal instinct overtakes human reason, ignorance crushes culture, and the riff-raff get what they want.

In contrast, many leftist intellectuals denigrate soccer because it castrates the masses and derails their revolutionary ardor. Bread and circus, circus without the bread: hypnotized by the ball, which exercises a perverse fascination, workers' consciousness becomes atrophied and they let themselves be led about like sheep by their class enemies.

In the River Plate, once the English and the rich lost possession of the sport, the first popular clubs were organized in railway workshops and shipyards. Several anarchist and socialist leaders soon denounced the clubs as a manoeuvre by the bourgeoisie to forestall strikes and disguise class divi-

sions. The spread of soccer throughout the world was an imperialist trick to keep oppressed peoples in an eternal childhood, unable to grow up.

But the club Argentinos Juniors was born with the name Chicago Martyrs, in homage to those anarchist workers, and May First was the day chosen to launch the club Chacarita in a Buenos Aires anarchist library. In those first years of the century, plenty of left-leaning intellectuals celebrated soccer instead of repudiating it as a sedative of consciousness. Among them, the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci praised “this open-air kingdom of human loyalty.”



### a flag that rolls

DURING THE summer of 1916, in the midst of the World War, an English captain named Neville launched a military attack by kicking a ball. He leapt out from behind the parapet that offered him some cover, and chased the ball toward the German trenches. His regiment, at first hesitant, followed. The captain was cut down by gunfire, but England conquered that no-man’s-land and celebrated the battle as the first victory of British soccer on the front lines.

Many years later, toward the end of this century, the owner of Milan won the Italian elections with a chant from

the stadiums, “*Forza Italia!*” Silvio Berlusconi promised to save Italy the way he had saved Milan’s all-time champion superteam, and voters forgot that several of his companies were on the edge of ruin.

Soccer and fatherland are always connected, and politicians and dictators frequently exploit those links of identity. In ’34 and ’38, the Italian squad won the World Cup in the name of the fatherland and Mussolini, and the players started and finished each game by saluting the crowd with their rights arms outstretched, giving three cheers for Italy.

For the Nazis, too, soccer was a matter of state. A monument in the Ukraine commemorates the players of the 1942 Dynamo Kiev team. During the German occupation they committed the insane act of defeating Hitler’s squad in the local stadium. Having been warned, “If you win, you die,” they started out resigned to losing, trembling with fear and hunger, but in the end they could not resist the temptation of dignity. When the game was over all eleven were shot with their shirts on at the edge of a cliff.

Soccer and fatherland, fatherland and soccer: in 1934 while Bolivia and Paraguay were annihilating each other in the Chaco War, disputing a deserted corner of the map, the Paraguayan Red Cross formed a team that played in several Argentinian and Uruguayan cities and raised enough money to attend to the wounded of both sides.

Three years later, while General Franco, arm in arm with Hitler and Mussolini, bombed the Spanish Republic, a Basque team was on the road in Europe and Barcelona was playing in the United States and Mexico. The Basque government had

