



Uruguayan Arrivals

From Shadow to the Sun

On paper it was a match for the ages. On October 14, 2009, in Montevideo the two oldest soccer-playing nations in the region, Argentina and Uruguay, played for the 177th time for a spot in the 2010 World Cup. Lionel Messi, FIFA player of the year, faced off against Diego Forlán, Europe's Golden Boot winner for most goals in the 2008–9 season. Although the losing team would still have a chance to qualify for South Africa, their road would be more difficult: a home and away playoff series against a strong and confident Costa Rican side awaited.

On the field the game was uninspired, and spectators would have been forgiven for thinking that the match was nothing more than a meaningless “friendly.” Both teams used defensive strategies and appeared to fear losing more than they wanted to win, perhaps Argentina more than Uruguay. Why? With Ecuador one point behind in the standings, the Celeste, as the Uruguayan team is known for its sky blue uniforms, needed a win to guarantee qualification for South Africa. But the famed Uruguayan fighting spirit, called the *garra charrúa*, seemed to be missing. Uruguay's *garra* had brought the country four

world championships between 1924 and 1950, but since then it had been conspicuously absent. This team, however, was supposed to embody the heart of the small country again, mixing a never-say-die attitude with the technical skills of Forlán and strike partner Luís Suárez.

The sole spark of excitement came when Argentine substitute Mario Bolatti scored the game's lone goal in the eighty-second minute off a sloppy set piece. Argentina was on its way to South Africa, beating the team that for much of the twentieth century had been its regional nemesis. At the time, the match devastated Uruguay. While the Celeste would go on to qualify for the World Cup, losing to archrival Argentina at home was a particularly harsh blow. The loss appeared to be one more example of Uruguay's decline in soccer, a sport that had historically done much to elevate national pride.



There is no better place to start the story of Latin American soccer than the Río de la Plata, the region named for the estuary that separates Argentina and Uruguay, where the sport first arrived on Latin American shores. And soccer history in the region rests heavily on competition between the two countries, among the oldest rivalries in the world. While play began first in Argentina, Uruguay quickly outpaced its larger neighbor. The Celeste won the first two South American Championships and four of the first six world championships to become the first soccer power in the world.

We would do well to ask why soccer caught on so quickly in Uruguay. One answer is that ties between England and Uruguay were particularly close. Another answer suggests that the development and consolidation of the Uruguayan state occurred slightly later than in other countries, thus coinciding more closely with the popularization of soccer in the country. Indeed, the context of soccer's arrival in Uruguay is important to understanding its power over the Uruguayan national psyche. Equally important is the narrative that grew up around soccer's development. Uruguay's soccer history posits a nationalization of the English sport (exhibited by beating expatriate teams) and an ability to defeat larger neighbors in international play as sources of pride and a representation of Uruguayan nationalism.

Soccer arrived in Uruguay at a particular time in regional history. During the late nineteenth century Latin American countries entered what historians call the neocolonial period, which heralded major changes in the region. National governments sought to modernize agriculture, industrialize, establish educational systems, develop infrastructure, foster immigration, and court foreign investment from Europe. Soccer came along with these changes. Other cultural forms—from clothing styles to consumer goods and membership in social clubs—required either money or connections, or both. But soccer easily diffused to the working classes. To paraphrase Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano, soccer quickly became a universal language spoken equally well by poor immigrants from Europe and rural migrants to the capital city. For national leaders, soccer had other benefits as well: it generated unity around the selected eleven. Ethnic, political, and class difference could be set aside in cheering on the national team. From a nation of many, then, soccer could help unite the country.

Galeano titled his iconic book about soccer *El fútbol a sol y sombra—Soccer in Sun and Shadow*. Although he discussed the sport around the world, nevertheless the title inadvertently alludes to soccer's role in Uruguay. From a “tiny spot on a map” wedged in the shadows between two larger and more powerful neighbors (Argentina and Brazil), soccer helped Uruguay emerge into the sun as one of the most respected sporting nations in the world. Success on the field in turn helped bolster Uruguayans' sense of pride in their nation.

Uruguayan Contexts

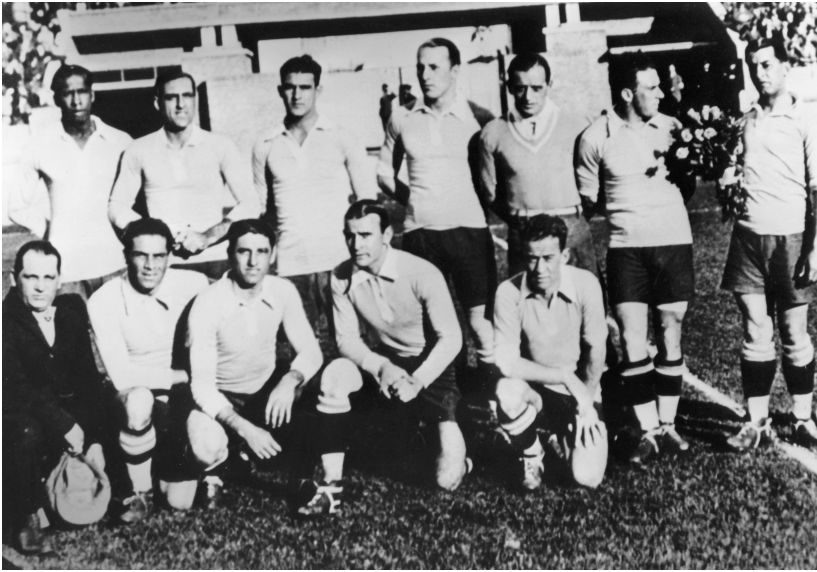
If people in the United States thought of Uruguay prior to the 2010 World Cup, they might have thought of the beaches of Punta del Este or perhaps expensive grass-fed beef. More likely they would have said something along the lines of, “Isn't that a small Latin American country?” Most would not have thought about it as a soccer powerhouse, nor as a highly developed, modern nation. Yet Uruguay has been both an Olympic and World Cup champion and one of the wealthiest Latin American nations, whether measured by per capita gross domestic product, educational attainment and literacy, infant mortality, or life

expectancy. Indeed, for much of the twentieth century Uruguay stood apart from its neighbors in terms of social spending and social development. At the beginning of the century it also stood above most of the region in soccer.

Uruguay has no right to be a soccer power. Nor should it ever have been one. It is a small nation. At a little over sixty-eight thousand square miles, Uruguay is roughly the size of Missouri, or half the size of Italy. Uruguay also has few people. Its population was slightly more than 1.5 million people when José Nasazzi led the Celeste to the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics, and just over 1.7 million people lived there six years later, when Uruguay hosted and won the first World Cup. Uruguay was also a predominantly rural country—in 1908 about 30 percent of the national population lived in the capital city, Montevideo—and soccer was seen as growing best in urban and suburban environments. In other words, conditions in Uruguay would not seem to have been ideal for the development of soccer.

Nevertheless, in other ways the conditions were ripe for soccer's development into the national game: foreign investment and influence, immigration, a growing working and middle class, and political stability. That these phenomena occurred contemporaneously with soccer's popularization powerfully tied the game to a sense of progress in Uruguay at the turn of the century. Moreover, the sport played a crucial role in bringing the country together after nearly a century of political infighting and instability.

When soccer arrived in Uruguay in the 1870s, the country was just emerging from a prolonged period of political strife. Independence in 1815 was delayed by Portuguese invasion a year later, and Uruguay became a province of Brazil until 1828. That year England brokered a treaty to ensure Uruguayan independence. At that point the population of Uruguay stood at seventy-four thousand, smaller than the *cities* of Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro. Even with British backing, political turmoil continued as Uruguay was used as a pawn in a struggle for regional hegemony between Argentina and Brazil. The Guerra Grande (1839–52), a civil war that saw Brazil and Argentina support opposing Uruguayan factions, created further political upheaval. Into the 1870s Uruguayan political leaders complained about their neighbors'



The Uruguayan National Team in 1929, between victories in the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and the first World Cup. © DPA/ZUMAPress.com

influence on internal affairs, noting that Uruguay was a “toy . . . today of these [Argentina] and tomorrow of those [Brazil],” which kept the country in a state of “permanent anarchy.”¹ Argentine and Brazilian political interests in the *Banda Oriental* ultimately stunted the growth of autonomous political parties and delayed Uruguayan economic development.

Still, England’s presence in the Río de la Plata ensured Uruguayan independence and helped its economy grow. But it could not stop the regular internecine fighting between the two Uruguayan political forces: *Blancos* and *Colorados*. To the extent that ideologies mattered, these parties hewed closely to the ideas of their regional counterparts. The conservative Blancos sought to hold on to the old order as much as possible by retaining social and economic structures from the colonial period and maintaining close ties between church and state. The liberal Colorados, on the other hand, rhetorically sought to broaden the notion of citizenship, to separate church and state, and to modernize trade and economic activity. Likewise, they fostered stronger economic and cultural ties with northern Europe.