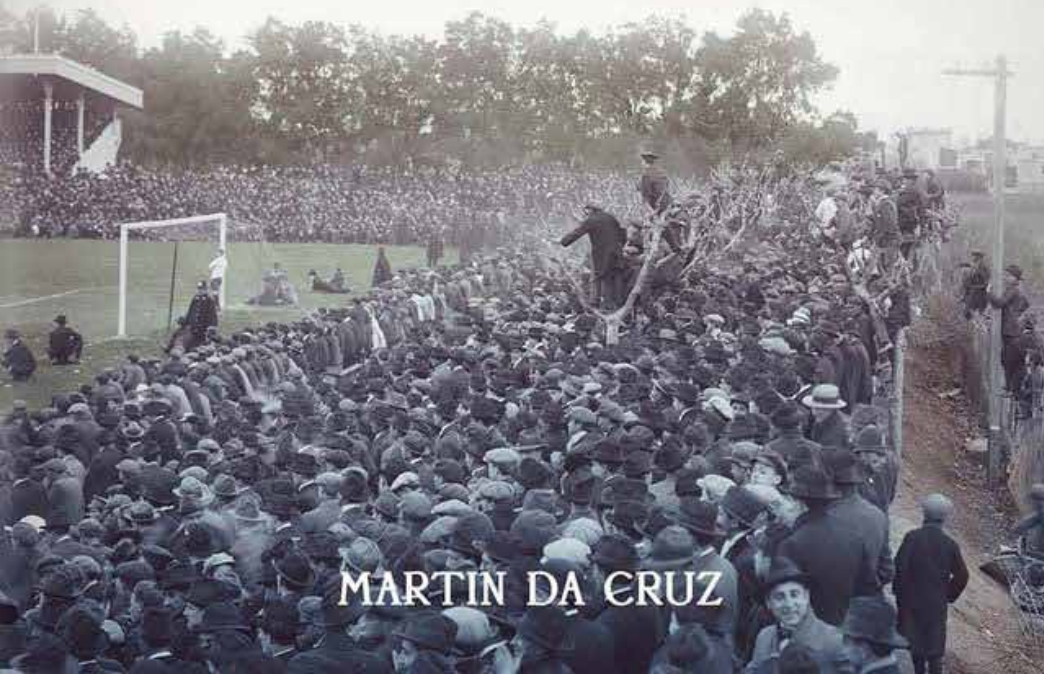
FROM BEAUTY TO DUTY

A Footballing History of Uruguay 1878-1917



MARTIN DA CRUZ

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pitch

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Precarious Walls

ONE DAY in October 1878, 22 men gathered on an open field in the Montevideo suburb of La Blanqueada. They met not far from the site of an event steeped in national significance. Back in 1811, in the Quinta de la Paraguaya, the revolutionary leaders of the *Banda Oriental* proclaimed José Artigas as *Jefe de los Orientales*, ushering in a struggle for independence from Spanish rule. Now, 67 years later, another group was taking part in another event of national importance – the first game of football on Uruguayan soil.

They played two matches that day. A Uruguayan side bolstered by several British people and their sons faced a team of Englishmen. The first ended in a draw, the second a win for the Uruguayans. And in an inadvertent homage to that revolutionary cry of 1811 they were brutal struggles. They say one player suffered two broken ribs in a collision. 'It was a very rough game in those days,' recounted Pedro Campbell Towers, a participant that afternoon. 'Football had not yet been properly defined … it was played almost like rugby.'

While those initial encounters are remembered through oral tradition, Uruguay's first recorded football match took place on 25 August 1880, the country's Independence Day.

The match once again took place at La Blanqueada, and a Uruguayan side once again faced an English opponent. On this occasion, however, the event counted on the presence of a local observer who, under the pseudonym '*Glauco*', penned the first local impressions of the game for newspaper *El Siglo*.

The chronicler described the combatants. On one side stood the Uruguayans, 'sons of our principal families', who in their youth had 'practised those customs of the Saxon race'. On the other was a team of 'English youths, in whose veins ran the pure blood of the blond Albion'. And as they took positions on what seemed like a vast green carpet, out of nowhere appeared 'a man with a white beard, dressed in black, looking more like a missionary than a player … he was the referee of this strange gathering'.

From the opening whistle it was chaos. 'From all sides,' *Glauco* observed, 'grotesquely dressed individuals run, scream, push, fall, rise.' The references to violence and pyramid formations and scrums have led many to conclude that the football played that day was in fact rugby, not association rules, although Towers' comments about a 'yet undefined' game leave open the question. Whatever the code, this never-before-seen English game produced an intriguing reflection:

'I do not know why in those moments, when I was watching that spectacle until that point unknown … I remembered Dante, and in one of those strange and mysterious aberrations of the spirit I also remembered carnival and a crazy house … football thus has a sublime side and a ridiculous side.'

From the beginning, the game of the 'crazy English' had entered the Uruguayan imaginary. Yet there was something alluring about this strange spectacle, a plasticity from which something beautiful could be realised. 'Three

hurrahs!' the chronicler dedicated to the victorious Britons. 'Hurrahs that could only be launched by true Englishmen.' Then, a final call to the defeated: 'Although I do not believe that national honour may be engaged on this occasion, I would ask my compatriots to make new efforts to achieve the laurels conquered by the children of the blond Albion.' The message was all prophetic. They need not abandon all hope. One day a future generation of Uruguayans would take this foreign game and make it their own.

But for the time being, football remained the sole domain of the so-called true Englishmen. After mediating Uruguay's creation as an independent buffer state in 1828, Great Britain remained inextricably linked to the nation's material growth and ideas of progress. Despite reaching a peak population in Uruguay of around 2,000 in the 1890s, compared to 40,000 in neighbouring Argentina, the British pervaded the Uruguayan economy. As the country grew, London banks met its financial needs. Britons arrived in Montevideo and ran almost all of its public utilities, while engineers and workers laid railways connecting the interior to the capital and facilitating the entrance of Uruguayan meat and wool into the Atlantic economy.

In keeping with their economic influence, the British garnered a respect not afforded to the hundreds of thousands of Italian, Spanish, and French immigrants seeking a new life in the Río de la Plata estuary region. In the eyes of Uruguay's political elite and educators, the British were different. Those tasked with grappling with the country's identity issues saw the 'sensible' Anglo-Saxon as a model of 'civilisation', a beacon of modernity and progress to which emerging Latin nations should aspire. British regional differences mattered little and class distinctions less. Those born in Glasgow or London or Dublin were all considered English, their social status back home erased. In Uruguay,

the so-called English were 'a special type of immigrant', according to Franklin Morales, 'each in a certain sense a "milord"' in the social imaginary.

Aware of their special status, these 'milords' etched their own little world in Montevideo. They established a church and social club, a hospital and cemetery, English-language newspapers and schools. Historian Álvaro Cuenca called these institutions a sociocultural consequence of Britain's informal empire, a strategy to 'combat and defeat the most profound fear of the Late-Victorian era: turning native'. In a distant, 'uncivilised' environment, the British erected 'cultural walls' behind which they could retain a sense of identity and stay connected to home.

One of the first cultural walls arrived at the end of 1842 when a group of British residents – many of whom had fled the tyrannical rule of Juan Manuel de Rosas in Buenos Aires – founded the Victoria Cricket Club. They played in Pueblo Victoria, a zone north-west of Montevideo Bay named after the recently crowned monarch and home to the meat-processing plant of prominent businessman Samuel Fisher Lafone. Yet British dreams of leisure and seclusion were dashed just months later when Manuel Oribe and his rebel army entered Uruguayan territory and fixed their sights on the capital. So they abandoned Pueblo Victoria, retreating behind the fortified walls of Montevideo's Old City where they would remain for the next eight years during the Great Siege. Described by Alexandre Dumas as the 'New Troy', the Uruguayan Civil War attracted global powers and an Italian exile called Giuseppe Garibaldi. His legion of volunteer compatriots donned red shirts and fought for the defence of Montevideo.

On 18 July 1861, a decade after the end of the civil war, a group of majority Victoria Cricket Club members founded the Montevideo Cricket Club (MVCC). A pioneer

of Uruguayan sport, MVCC introduced rugby, tennis, and indeed football to Montevideo. Yet the club's significance went far beyond sport. This was a model English institution. Their home in the faraway neighbourhood of La Blanqueada symbolised their exclusive nature. Outside the purview of Montevideo proper, the place they called the 'English ground' provided a space in which the British community could come together, consolidate affections, and host the British Navy squadrons passing through the Uruguayan capital.

It was a similar story across the rest of South America, with British merchants, bankers, and educators founding cricket clubs in Buenos Aires, Valparaíso, Rio de Janeiro, and Lima. And occasionally they came together, behind a curious transnational cultural wall. In 1864, MVCC invited their Buenos Aires equivalent to play the continent's first international cricket match. Then, in a moment quintessentially Uruguayan, the idea was abandoned after yet another insurrection. Sporting activity slowed for the next two years as Uruguay joined Brazil and Argentina in their long and destructive war against Paraguay. And in 1868, while they cut their neighbour into pieces, Montevideo and Buenos Aires finally played their game and began an international sporting tradition.

Yet sporadic cricket internationals did little to enrich Uruguay's sporting culture. Montevideo Cricket needed a domestic rival. So on 8 May 1874, 45 mostly British residents – many of whom were MVCC members – founded the Montevideo Rowing Club. Though closely tied to the British community, Montevideo Rowing boasted a more cosmopolitan identity linked to the capital's port activities and a more diverse membership including Germans and several *criollo* (native-born Uruguayan) elites. And they soon established a friendly rivalry with Montevideo Cricket Club,

playing rugby and cricket and participating in athletics carnivals.

In June 1881, the cricket and rowing clubs played Uruguay's first recorded inter-club football match. The English Ground bore all the hallmarks of an exclusive British gathering. The most conspicuous members of the community braved the disagreeable weather to fill the main stand. On the pitch, the British minister-resident and consul-general to Uruguay, Edmund Monson, provided the ceremonial kick-off and served as referee. And in contrast with the self-image of those present, the game was marred by violence and disorder, MVCC's captain forced off the ground after a heavy hit. Yet the ugliness of the spectacle hindered little its significance. It was the start of what historian Juan Carlos Luzuriaga called 'Football and Friends', an insular British sporting culture carried out in the most upright and correct amateur spirit.

Montevideo Rowing Club's appearance soon threatened this exclusive culture. In contrast with the distant English Ground, their activities took place on Montevideo Bay, an accessible public space open to all the city's social classes. When their first rowing competition took place in 1875, the local press was struck by a 'spectacle that we have never witnessed amongst us'. The following year, 10,000 people watched the regattas between Montevideo and Buenos Aires. *Criollo* elites young and old rushed to join the nascent institution. Uruguayans began thinking they could stand on an equal footing with their British counterparts.

The cultural walls trembled. A decade on, discontent ran through the rowing club's *criollo* element. The so-called cosmopolitan club had remained decidedly British, rules stipulating that members must be 'properly acquainted' with the English language to form part of the committee. Perturbed by the exclusionary policy, Uruguayan members

lobbied to reform the club's statutes. The British majority dismissed their grievances. Tensions soon played out on the water. In the summer of 1888, a Uruguayan crew defeated their British counterparts in an internal competition. That triumph lit a fuse. On 5 May 1888, over 60 *criollo* members resigned en masse and founded a breakaway entity, Club Nacional de Regatas. It was a transformative moment in Uruguayan sport, the first 'national rebellion' within a British-dominated entity. The first time locals showed that they too could control their own sporting destinies. Montevideo's English-language press seethed, *The Express* condemning the rebel 'busybodies' and 'mischief makers' for their audacious attempt 'to convert an English institution into a native one'.

Football, however, remained a thing of the English. On 15 August 1889, a combined Montevideo Cricket and Rowing side hosted Buenos Aires Football Club in the first international played in the Río de la Plata. The match served as a homage to Queen Victoria's 70th birthday. The community filled the English Ground, joined by a large portrait of their monarch brought in from the British consulate, 'her eyes lowered in a mask of disdain' according to Eduardo Galeano. And there was truth to his claim, for it had rained for days so the ground was heavy and the spectacle ugly, the Argentines winning 3-1. Though reaffirming football as exclusive and English, that first international marked the beginning of a rivalry that would consume future generations.

The fixture also introduced the first wave of expert footballers to Montevideo. The most talented was Offley Scoones, who formed part of the influx of young British professionals and workers into Uruguay in the late 1880s. Of a privileged upbringing, Scoones brought a footballing pedigree from his time at Old Westminster FC, where he

faced London's strongest teams and reached the FA Cup quarter-finals in 1884 and 1886. He also earned an Oxford University 'Blue' and was apparently a reserve for the famous Corinthian team. And in that first international, Scoones produced a fine individual effort to score Uruguay's first international goal.

When the Montevideo team travelled to Buenos Aires the following year they had another young English talent. Henry Stanley Bowles had arrived in Uruguay earlier that year, the 18-year-old using a family connection to gain work at the Montevideo Telegraph Company. Like Scoones, the Brighton-born forward boasted a skilful game, supposedly playing for the youth side of the famous Preston North End. And like Scoones, he scored Uruguay's consolation goal in a 2-1 defeat to the Argentines, in which a Scot by the name of Alexander Watson Hutton served as referee.

The most important figure in those first Uruguay–Argentina contests was William Leslie Poole. A Kent-born Anglo-Scot, Poole completed his secondary studies at Cambridge before sailing across the Atlantic. Arriving in Montevideo in 1885, the 18-year-old immersed himself in the community through sport, playing cricket for MVCC and becoming vice-captain of Montevideo Rowing in 1888. And he was an expert footballer, playing at centre-forward and significantly, perhaps revealing his Scottish roots, displaying a more refined passing game, privileging combination over the brute force of dribbling. Yet Poole's importance went beyond exclusive sporting cultures and consolation goals. It all started when he reversed his original intentions to gain office work to take a job at Montevideo's English High School.

Founded in 1874 by prominent resident Henry Castle Ayre, the school educated the sons of British residents and those of the local elite. It served as a formative cultural

wall for an impressionable Anglo-Uruguayan youth thought to be more susceptible to *criollisation*. And like Alexander Watson Hutton in Buenos Aires, Ayre, along with Jeffries T. Ashe at the Montevideo British School, saw team sports as essential to the formation of their students, to instil self-confidence and discipline and respect for authority. In a word, to create strong, healthy, moral men capable of maintaining the patriarchy and serving the empire. In 1881 Ayre introduced football to the school, founding the Junior Cricket and Athletic Club in 1884. Arriving the following year, William Leslie Poole went further, complementing his official teaching duties by playing football with the youngsters.

While the British School played sports at La Blanqueada, Poole took his English High School pupils on horse-drawn trams from the Old City to the coastal suburb of Punta Carretas. Back then the area remained a vast open space, its few landmarks including a lighthouse and an old racecourse. And there, on fields overlooking the sea where the Río de la Plata met the Atlantic, Poole instilled within his students a love for football. Like Montevideo Bay before, Punta Carretas brought football into the local consciousness. With no walls or fencing, a game played by an exclusive institution could be watched by all. In their 1942 book *Del Fútbol Heroico,* the Magariños brothers recounted the game's first steps on the coast. Among the first local observers were fishermen and families and children who scoured rocks and collected shells and scraps. And at first they were startled as they watched this band of uncouth youths running around, kicking a strange round mass, shouting in an even stranger tongue.

The most enthusiastic of those boys was Henry Candid Lichtenberger. Born in Montevideo to a Brazilian father of Alsatian roots and an Irish mother of Scottish descent, he

completed his studies at 12 and began working soon after. Despite leaving the English High School the year of Poole's arrival in Uruguay, Lichtenberger played with the teacher at Punta Carretas and the Montevideo Rowing Club, which he had joined at the age of 15. Yet Lichtenberger preferred the company of his former class-mates. They all preferred the freedom of Punta Carretas and its sea breezes, and there they intensified their love for the game.

The budding young footballers received a boost in early 1891 when 20-year-old John Woosey arrived in Montevideo. He was back in his city of birth after at least a decade in north-west England with his Uruguayan mother and Lancashire-born father. And in a story similar to Brazilian football's 'founding father' Charles Miller, Woosey, having learnt and lived football's popularisation first-hand, returned to Uruguay with a little book of rules and a desire to continue. And out there at Punta Carretas he found a group of like-minded youngsters longing for something more than the odd kick-about. Now, armed with up-to-date knowledge from the cradle of the game, it was time to create something of their own.

So towards the end of May 1891, Lichtenberger reached out to his former school-mates and friends to bring their passion to light. On 1 June 1891, 22 former and current English High School students founded a club called Football Association. The name, though lacking imagination, quite perfectly revealed the significance of the moment – this was Uruguay's first club dedicated exclusively to the practice of football.