

Viva **Colombia**

Mark Biram

A Social History of Colombian
Football in Fifteen Players



Foreword by
Tim Vickery

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The Wilderness Years

THE MAIN reason for the lopsided nature of the players selected for this social history is that the fortunes of the national team(s) only really become of importance to the country's national identity in very recent times, as various researchers, players, journalists and even drug barons have testified. For example, Colombia did not even become a member of CONMEBOL until 1935, by which time Uruguay, a much smaller country, had already won the Copa América six times (beginning with the first edition in 1916), won the Olympic Games twice (in 1924 & 1928) when the tournament was a proxy World Cup (at least for Uruguayans) and then hosted and won the first official World Cup in 1930. Similarly, Argentina, though a little slower out of the blocks than their utterly remarkable smaller neighbour, had already triumphed four times in the Copa América and were runners-up to Uruguay in the aforementioned inaugural World Cup.

Colombia's football beginnings as a national side, by comparison to those two in particular, were humble, to put it euphemistically. The first tournament Colombia would contest, as mentioned briefly in the introduction, was the 1938 Bolivarian Games. At that tournament, as hosts, they scraped by Venezuela before finishing disappointingly behind Perú, Bolivia and Ecuador. Part of the reason for this was that ADEFUTBOL, nominally the representative 'national' football association at that time, was, in effect, only the organising body for the Liga de Foot-ball of Atlántico province, based in Barranquilla, the city where football first arrived in Colombia.

For this reason, with disproportionate control over national affairs, ADEFUTBOL decided to field an almost entirely *costeño* team, meaning that in the first nominally 'national' team game, Colombia were largely represented by a very small region where football first arrived. Whether a team representative of all Colombia's regions would have been more effective at that time is open to speculation, but certainly the Atlántico region, the cradle of Colombian football, was considered to be the most competitive amateur league.

Seven years later, in 1945, Colombia would make their first appearance at the Copa América (still known as the South American Championship at that point). Once again, ADEFUTBOL sent a squad that only really represented the coastal region of Atlántico. It was the 18th edition, held in Chile. It is open to question as to whether Colombia were at their most amateur in their travel arrangements or on the pitch. Allegedly, it took them 24 days to reach Chile on a circuitous (or downright daft) route that the most rudimentary of research would have deemed inappropriate or outright ridiculous. They took in ports that didn't sail to the next port, used roads that weren't even completed and essentially did a lot of backtracking. It is insightful of regional infighting that there were even attempts to prevent the team from travelling, including, as a final resort, a call to the Colombian ambassador advising him that on no account should the team be allowed to compete at all. Compete they did, understanding 'compete' in the 'it's the taking part that counts' way. Colombia did register their first goal at the tournament, albeit in a 1-9 reverse versus against Argentina, and even went on to edge out Ecuador and draw with Bolivia.

It is perhaps worthy of note that Colombia only started using the yellow shirt as we know it from the mid-80s onwards. Whilst the colours of the Colombian national side are now a taken-for-granted part of the team's identity, for many years this wasn't the case. The yellow shirt as we know it was

designed by Maria Elvira Pardo, who felt that the shirt ought to have stronger links to the country's national flag, ergo its identity.

Colombia actually played their first games in a celeste kit more likely to stir the emotions of Uruguayans, Mancunians or Sheikhs in Abu Dhabi. Following that, they spent a good period in the 1960s paying tribute to the Highlands of bonny Scotland in dark blue shirts (or maybe more likely paying tribute to the great Millonarios of the El Dorado era). Following this came the Clockwork Orange years of the 70s and 80s, which did occasionally have a diagonal sash with the colours of the country's flag. It is arguable that this diagonal sash was first popularised by Perú or more likely the great River Plate 'Máquina' team, however, who, to this day, both continue to use a distinctive white with a red diagonal sash. Whilst the colour of the kit may seem a relatively trivial issue, it appears that until the national team actually showed signs of being in some way representative of the entire nation, the matter never engendered a great deal of serious thought.

The elephant in the room, of course, is the El Dorado-era pirate league. In a book detailing the history and development of Colombian football, the question is to what extent did the El Dorado league stymie or aid the growth of the nation's football? There is no single answer to this question. Of course, in one sense it undeniably generated a spike in interest in the game. Locals were fascinated by the arrival of Pedermera and Di Stéfano. It meant sell-out stadiums and displays of stylish attractive football were plentiful. The whole venture, though, fairly unambiguously, was rooted in profit-making, short-termism and opportunism. It meant that the professional league that was created, DIMAYOR, was disaffiliated from FIFA and would not be allowed to rejoin until 1954 – resulting in a ban from the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland. Moreover, it meant that the founding principle of Colombia's professional football federation was pecuniary entrepreneurship.

In the history of Colombian football at institutional level, this fundamentalist zeal for gainful ventures is only ever trumped, if at all, by an even more dogmatic commitment to defending male hegemony, as I would find out during my doctoral research on women's football in Colombia. Women are forever pushed to the periphery, even when there are clear commercial opportunities to grow the game, with belittling and condescending attitudes depressingly normalised and actions which damage the prospects of women players and the women's league taken on a regular basis.

The El Dorado league was born out of a peculiar set of circumstances – the key players in Argentina and Uruguay were on strike, unhappy with their lot – and this *emprededorismo* (entrepreneurship) was exemplified by Alfonso Senior Quevedo. He was then president of Millonarios and later twice would become the president of the national federation. He was the author of the semi-harebrained but also very innovative scheme of luring the best players from the other end of the continent to Colombia with the promise of filthy lucre. His daring signings sparked a lunatic arms race with many of the other big clubs, and the Colombian public had a ready-made distraction from the powder-keg political situation after the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948.

Such were the wide-ranging ramifications of Senior Quevedo's opening salvo, even some of the best British players found themselves venturing to destination unknown. Charlie Mitten, star winger of the post-war Manchester United side, became known as the 'Bogotá Bandit'. Neil Franklin and George Mountford followed him. Together with Di Stéfano, Rossi and Pedernera, suddenly the DIMAYOR league, whilst illegal, looked like boasting some of the world's greatest stars.

The problem with the league was that it did not include enough of the best Colombian players, denying them an opportunity to develop to the kind of standards which had been achieved elsewhere on the continent. Moreover, the league had

the feel of an exhibition league, more given to showmanship than developing the long-term building blocks that Colombian football clearly needed to grow. The players were rumoured to live bohemian lifestyles and it is hard to compare them with teams from elsewhere in the world at that time because, banned from FIFA, they were never allowed to play anyone outside Colombia.

What is for sure, is that the El Dorado years, whilst providing an entertaining narrative worthy of a film, did very little for the advancement of the Colombian national team or even a mentality that countenanced the idea of a serious national team. In the meantime, and in a similar vein, ADEFUTBOL continued its obdurate policy of sending only *costeños* to compete on behalf of football and thus the true history of Colombian national football was perpetually deferred for decades.

Colombia's first appearance at a World Cup owed as much to coincidence as to careful methodical planning. The format which has been in use for qualification for the 1998 World Cup onwards, whereby each of the ten teams plays each other twice (18 games), lends the modern-day qualification process the feel of a league season, with each of the teams able to accrue valuable experience and arrive at the World Cup in a highly competitive state to face teams from any other continent. In this context, regular competitive football allows managers to crystalise a preferred method and style, as well as take lessons from defeat without being outright eliminated (as per a league format). It is a cliché to say South American qualification is the hardest of all the continents, but there is surely an element of truth to it (notwithstanding the fact that, with the intercontinental play-off, five of the continent's ten member teams are able to qualify – a much greater percentage than anywhere else in the world).

We now take for granted the World Cup as the ultimate objective of most FIFA member nations. This clearly wasn't always the case. Colombia withdrew from the 1938 World Cup in France in order to participate in the 1938 Central American

and Caribbean Games together with Mexico and a scattering of other Central American republics. Colombia would also shun the first post-war World Cup in Brazil in 1950, once again to compete in the 1950 Central American and Caribbean Games (which were won by Curaçao). This coincided with Colombia becoming somewhat of an international pariah following the illegal El Dorado league, which saw FIFA ban them from participating in qualification for the 1954 World Cup in Switzerland. Colombia failed to win a game in attempting to qualify for the 1958 tournament. Until the United States hosted in 1994, there seemed a tacit agreement between the main two footballing continents whereby they would generally take it in turns hosting the tournament. Nobody else got to host it and spots to even compete in it were at a premium. As Europe had hosted in 1954 and 1958, there was a feeling that 1962 would go back to South America for the first time since Brazil hosted in 1950.

In any case, I digress. The point is that Colombia arrived at the 1962 World Cup after a mammoth qualification schedule of just two games (home & away versus Perú). Aided by Brazil's automatic qualification as holders and Chile's status as hosts of the tournament, together with Paraguay being arbitrarily selected to play an intercontinental play-off with Mexico, Colombia were placed together in a 'group' with just Perú to decide which of the two would reach the 1962 World Cup. This series of chance happenings gave Colombia a gift of an opportunity to reach a first World Cup in their history, which they duly took.

3 June 1962, World Cup group phase, Estadio Carlos Dittborn, Arica, Soviet Union 4 Colombia 4

Context

Colombia's debut match at the World Cup was actually fairly humdrum. They met continental neighbours Uruguay in Arica four days earlier and lost 2-1 after leading through an early penalty. The opponent was relatively familiar - one they had only beaten once in 1957 - and the game went off with nothing particular to remember it by. On 3 June in Arica, Colombia would compete in a game that lives long in the memory and one that bequeathed us a record which stands to this day. The tournament was the third held on South American territory, falling at an important juncture, both in a football sense and geopolitically.

The political context in which Chile received the hosting of the 1962 World Cup was crucial. Latin America found itself between two paradigms: one of modernisation and the coming dependency theory. Modernisation theory held that as societies become more industrialised and economically 'modern', this newfound wealth saw their political institutions become increasingly liberal democratic (arguably this type of thinking is once again pervasive, with only the assumption it will usher in liberal democracies a moot point). Dependency theory took issue with this, arguing that resources actually flow from poor and underdeveloped states to core wealthy states, enriching the latter at the expense of the former.

The two main bidders to host the competition were Argentina and Chile. With characteristic immodesty, the Argentinian delegate Raul Colombo declared 'we have it all, we can start the World Cup tomorrow'. With considerably more political acumen on this occasion, reading the paradigms of the time set out above, the Chilean delegate Carlos Dittborn also invoked Article Two of the statutes of FIFA, which was already paying lip service to the need to

promote football in what it then dubbed 'the underdeveloped' countries. Dittborn allegedly used the following pithy slogan: '*Porque no tenemos nada, queremos hacerlo todo*' (precisely because we have nothing, we want to do everything). With another apocryphal phrase of possibly slightly contrived and disingenuous humility, then, the Chilean bid won out. It is dubious as to whether the phrase was even uttered at the 1956 FIFA Congress in Lisbon at which the hosting of the event would be decided, but the popular press got hold of the phrase that must have been uttered in an interview related to the Congress, and from there it gained currency as having been the decisive moment.

To this day, the stadium in Arica where Colombia made their World Cup debut carries the slogan. Quite quickly, extra layers of meaning were added to the phrase; after the 1960 Valdivia earthquake, it became a slogan associated to the psychological and physical redevelopment of Chile in the aftermath of the tragedy. The 1960 Valdivia earthquake is still the largest ever recorded, at 9.5 on the Richter scale. It left millions homeless, particularly in southern Chile and even triggered tsunamis as far afield as Hawaii, Japan and the Philippines. Inevitably, it caused considerable damage to several prospective host cities, meaning the Chilean government's blanket support for the tournament was hastily watered down. With so many of its citizens affected by the earthquake, quite rightly priorities quickly shifted. Only four venues were used in 1962 and three of those, including a Rancagua facility borrowed from a US mining company (adding currency to the idea that Chile had nothing at that time), were close to the capital. The other, in the northern outpost of Arica, played host to all the games in Group One in front of fewer than 10,000 spectators.

The tournament was also foregrounded by geopolitical tensions, though they did not affect it directly. The Cuban missile crisis would follow months later, in October. On

the eve of the World Cup, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev accepted recommendations from his defence council to place a number of nuclear missiles in Cuba, provoking an atmosphere of fear and paranoia in the United States.

In numerous Olympic sports, the Soviet Union was pushing the limits of amateurism by sending state-trained full-time professionals. In this way, the country consistently finished first or second in almost every post-World War Two winter and summer Olympics. Crucially for this World Cup game, however, their sporting pre-eminence never quite tripped over into football. This detail didn't particularly bother the Colombian press nor suit their narrative. Rather dramatically, they slated the game as a clash between Colombia and one of the world's great 'superpowers'. In reality, if there was a team worthy of such praise in footballing terms in their group it was either of the other two opponents, Uruguay or Yugoslavia.

As an interesting quirk, the first person to manage Colombia at a World Cup was the Argentine Adolfo Pedernera. This is notable for two reasons. Firstly, it means that at three of the six World Cups Colombia has contested they have been managed by an Argentine (José Pékerman in 2014 & 2018). Secondly, there was no coincidence in Pedernera's involvement, as he was perhaps the marquee signing (together with Alfredo Di Stéfano, Julio Cozzi and England international Neil Franklin) of the unsanctioned El Dorado league (1949-54) which cost Colombia their chance to participate in the Switzerland 1954 tournament.

The day previous to Colombia's game, Pelé was injured and put out of the rest of the tournament in Brazil's second group match - an ugly 0-0 war of attrition with Czechoslovakia that would prove to be a warm-up for a much better final. One door closes, another one opens. The loss of Pelé gave Garrincha and Vavá the opportunity to take centre stage. Pelé, of course, would be brutally kicked out of the following World Cup in England (1966) as well, making it all the more

astounding that he is synonymous with the competition for the two tournaments which bookend his World Cup career, in 1958 and 1970.

The Action

The Soviet Union walk out in their familiar CCCP shirts (the Russian abbreviation for the Soviet Union of Socialist Republics), boasting the most distinguished goalkeeper, in Lev Yashin, and one of the most feared strikers in world football at that time, Valentin Ivanov. For that reason, no one is too surprised when, in the first 11 minutes, the Soviet team make the running, racing into a 3-0 lead, with Valentin Ivanov grabbing an impressive brace as the Colombia defence seemingly look on in awe of their better-known opponents. For the first two goals, the Colombians appear frozen with fear. With no sign of a challenge, an unmarked Ivanov rifles home a powerful shot for the first goal from the edge of the box. The second goal is much worse - probably the low of the game from a Colombian perspective. The Soviet midfielder Igor Chislenko waltzes past several Colombian defenders, who all look flat-footed and/or frightened to put in any kind of tackle. Chislenko manages to toe-poke the ball past the Colombian keeper, Efraín Sánchez, who doesn't cover himself in glory, coming off his line far too late to finish second to Chislenko.

The third goal, Ivanov's second, sees the striker beat the Colombian goalkeeper and captain Efraín Sánchez in a similar way to when the Uruguayan Ghiggia beat the Brazilian goalkeeper Barbosa in the 1950 World Cup Final in the Maracanã. The strike carries plenty of pace but is well within reach of the Colombian keeper. Barbosa would suffer a life of ignominy for his crucial error that day, but the context of Colombia's game saved the Colombian goalkeeper from any major recriminations and his blunder is lost in the annals of history, but for being brought up here.

The 3-0 scoreline must seem highly predictable, given the Colombian team's inexperience at such tournaments. After such a disappointing start, Colombia face the rest of the game being rendered a mere formality. An important moment comes 20 minutes in, however. The Colombian number ten, Rolando Serrano, confidently knocks the ball out of his feet and advances. He quickly picks out Antonio Rada just outside the Soviet box. With non-existent marking, Rada is able to play a simple pass through to the unmarked Germán Aceros, who slots past Yashin with little difficulty. As is often the case in such instances, whilst the Soviet team remain comfortably ahead, the Colombians have struck a psychological blow, sowing a seed of doubt in their opponents' minds. The game settles down again. Colombia go into the break 3-1 down but with their heads up. Colombia's earlier mistakes are put to the back of their mind and they go into the dressing room to receive a team talk from Adolfo Pedernera. As an ex-star player, his words carry significant weight, so when he tells them they aren't in any way inferior to the Soviet side and should play on the front foot in the second half, the message hits home immediately.

Despite this, Viktor Ponedelnik's simple finish on 56 minutes appears to end the game as a contest. At 4-1, you can only assume that the Colombians feel that they have nothing to lose; it will take something special to reignite the game, however. Twelve minutes later, Marcos Coll, a diminutive midfielder from Barranquilla, trots over to take a corner. As Yashin marshals his defence, Coll is struck by the Soviets' distinct height advantage in the box, feeling there is little chance that one of his team-mates will win the header against the giant defenders. Beyond that, he notices Yashin creeping forward confidently, ready to pounce on the incoming cross. For that reason, as the famed 'Black Spider' starts to move forward with self-assured hubris, anticipating another routine catch, Coll tries to curl the ball straight into the net. To his and

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everyone else's surprise, his corner floats straight in, leaving the great Yashin rooted to the spot like a statue. As Coll's 'Olympic goal' flies in, there is a huge roar from the 8,000 or so spectators, almost none of whom are Colombian, you would assume. The small crowd has seen a true moment of World Cup history.

The goal wins over the previously fairly ambiguous crowd. From this moment onwards, the Chilean crowd are with them all the way. Moreover, it spurs the Colombians on and imbues them with a belief previously lacking. No longer in awe of the opposition, they steam forward in numbers. Coll's goal has only pegged the score back to 4-2 with just over 20 minutes to go. Whilst two goals behind still, the manner of what has just passed once again gives them some impetus psychologically and visibly puts the Soviet Union on the back foot. With the locals firmly on their side, Colombia pour forward with the Soviet defence in disarray. A dangerous cross into the box is met by Antonio Rada, who just about manages to toe-poke the ball into the corner on 72 minutes. There is now somehow a sense of inevitability about Colombia drawing level. The Soviets are still lamenting the freak goal from the corner, licking their wounds, and the debutants drawing level appears on the cards.

Just as it looks like time is running out for Colombia, with just four minutes left on the clock, a hopeful ball forward puts Marino Klinger through one-on-one with the keeper. Yashin races out, realising that his only chance is to stop the forward with pure aggression but he fails to get anywhere near the ball, or even the man to commit a last-ditch foul. Klinger rounds him with little difficulty before gleefully rolling the ball into an empty net. The 'Miracle of Arica' is complete - Colombia have come from 4-1 down to parity in 20 inexplicable second-half minutes. The game ends 4-4. It is Colombia's first World Cup point and a very creditable one at that. However, it means that the underdogs still need to beat

a formidable Yugoslavia to have any chance of reaching the quarter-finals.

Endnote

Yugoslavia were a highly experienced and skilled team and Colombia lost 5-0 in a game that could have ended 10, 15 or 20-nil by all accounts. The game left such an indelible mark on the Colombian football psyche that they even tried two Yugoslav managers the following decade. Toza Veselinović and Blagoje Vidinić presided over Colombia's two attempts to reach the World Cup in the 1970s. The former failed in 1974 and the latter in 1978. Vidinić even managed Colombia to a first-round exit at the 1979 Copa América. In this way, Yugoslavs ended both Colombia's debut appearance at a World Cup in 1962 and also any chance of competing in two later World Cups, in 1974 and 1978. The long wait to return to the World Cup would start here and last 28 years.