



A HISTORY OF **BOCA JUNIORS**

DANIEL WILLIAMSON



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Chapter One

The Foundation

IT IS impossible to separate the characteristics of modern-day Argentina from the massive wave of immigration that inundated its Atlantic shores in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Football, the most fervent passion in the country today, is no exception to this rule. Whilst the movement of people dominates much of the current political discourse, it was actively encouraged by the embryonic Argentine government in the early 1800s after it had won independence from the Spanish Empire.

The territory of the new republic grew exponentially with the controversial Conquest of the Desert but, with a sparse indigenous population, the burgeoning economic powerhouse lacked the manpower to work the lands and provide a tax base. Between 1857 and 1930 Argentina received net immigration of 3.5 million people, almost half of which hailed from Italy, many of those from the peninsular escaping the hardships brought on by the Unification.

Many of those Italians searching for a better life ended up in North America, yet a huge number also docked in Buenos Aires. By 1914, as World War I escalated across Europe, it

was estimated that 30 per cent of Argentina's population of 7.9 million was foreign-born. Whilst this mass influx of bodies provided the labour needed to drive the economy, it diluted and influenced whatever culture existed. The new arrivals brought with them their traditions – customs, language, and food – creating a unique blend that is still evident to this day.

Argentina's industry in the late 19th century centred on agriculture, the Pampas among the most fertile lands in the world. British capitalists ploughed money into the nascent economy to improve the infrastructure – railroads, docks, warehouses, and public utilities – to boost the industry. Britain was the prime investor in young Argentina, helping to transform the new nation into a Latin American success story. By 1910, British companies all but monopolised Argentina's railways, and this remained the case until President Juan Domingo Perón nationalised the network in 1948.

The British also created institutions of their own – newspapers, English-language schools, hospitals, and businesses – and by 1890 the British contingent in Argentina numbered more than 45,000. British global expansion was far from an altruistic endeavour in nature, yet it did bestow upon Argentina its greatest export: football. One Brit in particular, Alexander Watson Hutton from Glasgow's tough Gorbals district, would have a profound effect on the future of the game in the emerging republic, and soon the new sport would spread like wildfire throughout the docks and *barrios* of Buenos Aires. Football thrived, in part, because it was less dangerous than other sports such as cricket and rugby, and the rules were simpler.

Born in June 1853, Watson Hutton graduated from the University of Edinburgh with a second-class degree in philosophy. However, his real passion lay in physical education, a love for sport brought on by the death of his

brothers from tuberculosis. Watson Hutton ventured to Argentina, arriving in 1882, and two years later founded the Buenos Aires English High School (BAEHS), a bilingual institution where sport was a key pillar of the curriculum.

Although football existed in Argentina before his arrival, Watson Hutton formalised the sport. On 12 February 1893 the Scotsman founded the Argentine Association Football League (AAFL), the first organised competition of its kind outside of the British Isles. The teacher entered a BAEHS team for former students into the league in 1898 yet, soon after, school names were banned as it was deemed a form of advertising so, in 1901, the team's name was changed to Alumni Athletic Club.

Whilst Alumni were sweeping all before them in the early years of official organised football, winning ten league titles in 12 years, what would later become known as Argentina's *Cinco Grandes* (Big Five) – Boca Juniors, River Plate, Independiente, Racing Club and San Lorenzo – were established, with immigrants at the heart of their foundation.

After several days of debate in early April 1905, Boca Juniors were founded on the third of the month, on a pleasant autumnal night. Five young men – Esteban Baglietto, Alfredo Scarpatti, Santiago Pedro Sana and brothers Teodoro and Juan Antonio Farenga – became the driving forces of the newly established club. The name referenced their *barrio* as well as paying homage to the pervading British influence in the burgeoning Argentine football scene. One of the founding members was also studying English at the time. A bench in Plaza Solís, a small park approximately 12 blocks from Boca's current home, is widely acknowledged as the club's official place of birth.

The colossal iron frame of the Puente Transbordador (transporter bridge) dominates the skyline of La Boca, straddling the Matanza River, also known as the Riachuelo,

connecting the city and province of Buenos Aires. The low-income neighbourhood grew due to the influx of immigrants, primarily from Genoa and other northern Italian towns and cities, who crafted dilapidated buildings from wood and sheet metal close to the port. These buildings would later be brightened up using leftover paint from ships, adorned with striking pastel colours which gave La Boca an identity that is still evident today and attracts tourists from all over the world.

Thousands of miles from home, the newly established neighbourhood teams became the immigrants' *de facto* national team, giving them colours to support and stand behind in the absence of a national flag. The territory of the *barrio* became their new national border to defend, providing a sense of belonging for those detached from their motherland. Instead, identity was forged on the pitch through the universal language of football. The protagonists behind the formation of Boca Juniors shared a distinct Genoese flavour, hence the nickname *Xeneizes*, and were no different.

With Baglietto installed as the club's first president, and even lining up as goalkeeper, Boca participated in their first-ever official game on 21 April 1905. Wearing a white shirt with three vertical black stripes hand-crafted by Manuela Farenga, sister of Teodoro and Juan Antonio, Boca thrashed Mariano Moreno 4-0 on the field of local club Independencia Sud. Scarpati, the club's first official secretary, was responsible for spreading the word about the club within the local community and, to swell the coffers, a membership scheme was created, starting at 50 cents per month with an initial five-peso registration fee.

Until 1908, when Boca joined the Argentine Football Association (AFA), the club participated in minor leagues and friendly matches. Following a 4-0 friendly victory over Ferro Carril Oeste, the club were placed in the second

division, where they performed admirably in what was their first official campaign since affiliation. Boca won their group and were only eliminated at the semi-final stage at the hands of eventual champions Racing.

In 1911 Boca participated in the División Intermedia, a newly created league sandwiched in between the first and second divisions. The club required a last-day victory to stave off relegation. Although Boca finished third in the 1912 Intermedia, the club were promoted to the top flight due to a restructure of the league, which expanded from 6 to 15 teams. Boca more than held their own in the top division, kicking off their campaign on 13 April with a comfortable 4-1 victory over Estudiantil Porteño. The season was most notable, however, for the first-ever official league meeting against River Plate on 24 August at the home of Racing. River, founded in 1901 in La Boca, won 2-1 in a bad-tempered affair.

After years of experimenting, 1913 also saw Boca settle on the shirt design – a gold horizontal stripe across the chest atop a blue background – which the club is now synonymous with. The colour combination was first worn in 1907 when club president Juan Brichetto, who also worked in the docks, was inspired by the passing of the *Drottning Sophia*, a Swedish ship sporting its national flag.

Racing went on to triumph in the 1913 Primera División, their first title signalling a seismic power shift away from the British clubs, such as Alumni, that dominated the early years of Argentine football. Alumni, the poster boys of the early days of the game in the republic, dissolved two years after their final match, beset by financial trouble and other major issues. A year after the AFA had Hispanicised its name, and with the game's rules now written in Spanish, the takeover was complete. Football became *fútbol*. The hegemony of the British clubs was over, and the remaining four members of

the Big Five would all go on to win their first titles over the next decade.

Boca moved up to third position in 1914 before dropping down to 14th in 1915, participating in a bloated 25-team league due to the reabsorption of the dissident Argentine Football Federation (FAF) after three years of rupture. In what amounted to a terrible campaign, Boca had to wait until their ninth game for a win and were on the receiving end of some crushing defeats, including 0-6 against Racing and 0-7 versus San Isidro.

Another disappointing term saw Boca finish 13th out of 22 in 1916. After two years based in Wilde, 10km to the south, the club returned to La Boca after membership had plummeted from 1,500 to just 300. For the members, mainly humble Genoese inhabitants of La Boca, Wilde may as well have been the other side of the world. Boca could have genuinely ceased to exist during the wilderness years in Wilde. This showed that the club are part of La Boca, and La Boca is part of Boca Juniors. The two are inextricably linked to this day.

Guillermo Schoua, a 42-year-old collector and statistician who works with the club's history department, and also created the outstanding Historia de Boca website, explains further: 'The remoteness of Wilde caused a significant drop in the number of members, but it was only meant to be a temporary move anyway. There were very few available pitches in La Boca, so the club rented in Wilde knowing they would have to do everything to return.'

Boca put two disappointing campaigns behind them in 1917 by finishing third, losing just two games out of 20. *Los Xeneizes* flew out of the traps and were unbeaten in 15 games until a 1-0 reverse to Racing proved decisive. Boca finished third yet again in 1918 yet trailed a dominant Racing, winning their sixth consecutive title, by 12 points. A 1-0

victory over River, however, on 18 August, brought several years of miserable results in the rivalry to an end. There were wild scenes in La Boca that night.

Two solid campaigns in 1917 and 1918 hinted that Boca, now firmly ensconced back in their neighbourhood, were on the cusp of glory. The year 1919 saw the second major schism in Argentine football. After just eight games, the championship was annulled following a dispute between the association and 13 of its members, who were unhappy with the governance of the game. The dissidents created the Asociación Amateurs de Football (AAmF) and organised a breakaway league; Boca Juniors remained loyal to the AFA, participating in the reorganised championship which kicked off on 28 September.

Boca hit the ground running, opening the season with a 5-1 home win over Porteño. The wins kept on coming and Boca ended the championship with a 100 per cent record, being crowned champions and earning the first star that would later adorn the club's crest. Although not all of the fixtures were fulfilled, and only six teams took part, the tournament was officially recognised and Boca's performances in the coming years proved that the club were one of the best in Argentina.

Alfredo Garasini and Alfredo Martín shared more than just a first name: they scored six goals apiece in the process and were the league's joint top scorers. After emerging from the club's youth ranks, Garasini debuted for the first team in 1916 and the adaptable forward would play numerous positions across the front line. Martín, signed from Tigre in 1918, would ultimately win three championships in the *azul y oro*.

Pedro Calomino, a youth-team product who debuted as far back as 1911, chipped in with five goals in eight games. The tricky winger is thought to have been the man who

invented the *bicicleta* (step over) to fool opponents. The 1919 title was the first of four Calomino won with the *boquense* club and amid that fruitful spell he even won the 1921 South American Championship with Argentina. 'The most important player in the early years, the club's first idol, was Pedro Calomino,' stated Guillermo Schoua.

At the other end of the pitch Américo Tesoriere was tasked with keeping opposition forwards at bay. The tall, slim goalkeeper was one of the biggest stars of his era. Despite his elegance, Tesoriere was fearless in attacking the ball and, distinctively, participated in games wearing a grey roll-neck pullover. Tesoriere won 37 caps for Argentina, winning the South American Championship in both 1921 and 1925.

Ahead of the 1920 campaign, eight teams were promoted to the top flight to augment the numbers. The distinct gulf in class between the existing teams and the newcomers, as well as the goals of Pablo Bozzo, allowed Boca to canter to back-to-back title success, losing just once in 24 games in finishing 12 points clear of newly promoted Banfield. In the AAmF league, River Plate claimed their first championship.

Despite losing just three games of the 1921 season, Boca were unable to retain their title and slipped to third amidst severe institutional and economic problems. Key players – including mainstays of the title-winning campaigns such as Tesoriere and Garasini – left before the season had begun, joining the unfancied Sportivo del Norte, who ultimately finished below Boca. Member numbers dropped to 600 and with just three games of the season remaining, Emilio Gagliolo resigned the presidency to be replaced by a temporary emergency commission.

The players who had previously defected to Sportivo del Norte returned, along with the addition of Domingo Tarasconi and Ángel Mé dici to the playing ranks. Tarasconi, a forward equally at home in the centre or on the right of

the pitch, was famed for his long-distance goals and scored a handful shy of 200 in his decade in the *azul y oro*. Despite the new additions, in the 1922 championship Boca failed to improve on the third-place finish from the previous year.

After two relatively quiet years, Boca were back in the title hunt in 1923, dominating the league along with Huracán, the pair finishing a country mile ahead of the rest of the field. A play-off was organised to decide who would be the worthy champion and, after two legs, the sides were one apiece. The third play-off finished 0-0 so a fourth game was arranged, at the home of Sportivo Barracas. Two from the prolific Tarasconi, who scored 39 league goals in just 33 appearances, gave Boca their third title in five years.

Los Xeneizes continued to underline their dominance in 1924, finishing five points clear of nearest challenger Temperley and just one draw away from a 100 per cent record, even without the departed Calomino. Tarasconi was once again ice cold in front of goal for the champions, whilst newcomer Ludovico Bidoglio, a central defender with exquisite technique, provided the class at the other end.

As well as the fourth league championship in six years, 1924 also saw the inauguration of the club's new 20,000-capacity wooden stadium in La Boca. Under the presidency of Manlio Anastasi, the club rented a plot of land penned in by railway tracks on one side, and by the streets Brandsen, Del Crucero (later Dr Del Valle Iberlucea) and Aristóbulo Del Valle. On 6 June the new stadium was opened with a 2-1 win over Nacional from Uruguay, with President of the Nation, Marcelo T. de Alvear and many other prominent figures in the crowd. It was at this location where Boca's *bostero* (a person who handles horse manure) nickname originated, as the new stadium stood next to a factory that created bricks out of horse manure. The new venue became a social hub of the neighbourhood, hosting

other activities such as basketball, paleta, boxing, and bowls. Soon the club boasted more than 8,000 *socios* (members).

Having acquired a stadium, and with four championships on the honours board, the club had already made massive strides. However, the events of 1925 would prove pivotal in spreading the name of the club beyond the *barrio*. The story began in September 1923, when three businessmen from Madrid sent a letter to the club, inviting them to embark on a tour of Spain. Football was on the up in Argentina, said the letter, and Boca were deemed the nation's greatest exponents of the beautiful game. Following the gold-medal success of neighbours Uruguay at the 1924 Paris Olympics, the AFA wanted to send an Argentine representative side on a tour of Europe yet failed to reach an agreement. This is where Boca stepped in to fill the void, becoming a *de facto* national team.

On 13 January 1925 Boca's *Comisión Directiva* assented to the businessmen's request and finally agreed to embark on the tour, adding matches in France and Germany to the itinerary. The trip would take players away from their families for five months and, more importantly from an economic point of view, their jobs. The concerned players were appeased with an attractive salary of 300 pesos per month for the duration of the tour.

Boca's squad was bolstered by the addition of five guest players from rival teams and the travelling delegation also included Hugo Marini, the head of sports of best-selling daily, *Crítica*. This was a huge development and represented the first time that football matches would be covered by newspapers in such depth. One fan, Victoriano Caffarena, joined the party, paying his own way but also doubling up as the team masseuse and kit man. He was a popular member of the group and was dubbed the *Jugador Número 12* (Twelfth Man) by the players.

The party set sail from Puerto Nuevo in February, receiving a send-off from more than 10,000 people, including fans and players from other clubs. After more than three weeks at sea, the boat completed its transatlantic voyage, and the opening match took place on 5 March. Boca beat Celta Vigo 3-1 then spent almost two months in Spain – also historically beating Real Madrid 1-0 – before moving on to Germany. The tour closed with a 4-2 victory over a Paris XI in the French capital and the overall record was an impressive one: played 19, won 15, drew one, with just three losses.

Throughout the tour Boca were proudly representing not only La Boca, but Buenos Aires and indeed the rest of Argentina. The national anthem was played before each game and news of the tour spread across the country where events were followed keenly. New icons, whose faces adorned the front covers of some of Argentina's most popular daily newspapers, were created. The tour made a huge impact in Argentina and the group returned in July, almost five months after the initial departure, greeted by a multitude of people. Although the club's heart and soul remained firmly in La Boca, it was now a true national passion, from La Quiaca on the Bolivian border in the north, down to Ushuaia in the south; from the peaks of the Andes in the west to the Atlantic coast. The slogan *La Mitad Más Uno* was born on this tour and Boca became the most popular club in Argentina.

Guillermo Schoua is in no doubt about the importance of the trip to Europe: 'It was a tipping point in the history of the club. Boca were already growing, had won their first titles, and, upon finishing the tour, became the most popular club in the country. The tour transcended borders and put Argentine football on the map.' However, even before the tour, Boca were already more popular than River, who had moved out of La Boca in 1923. 'According to the first survey, taken in 1911, Boca already had many more fans than

River and had larger attendances,' said Schoua. 'The tour increased Boca's popularity and River's departure to another neighbourhood ensured their club's survival. They had to find their stage, their fan base.'

The knock-on effect of the tour was that Boca had to give up the chance of defending the title they had won in 1924. With the blessing of the association, the club postponed their league fixtures and planned to play catch-up upon their return. However, they were unable to fulfil the schedule and only managed to complete seven fixtures, resulting in a fourth-from-bottom finish. The AFA bestowed upon the club the title of 'Campeón de Honor 1925' in recognition of the club's efforts to help put Argentine football firmly on the map and rival Uruguay's claim to *rioplatense* supremacy.

Boca's focus was firmly fixed on domestic matters in 1926, and the formidable outfit regained the championship without losing a single game, conceding just four goals in the process with the impenetrable Tesoriere – collecting his fifth championship medal – in goal. Thirty-eight of the club's 67 league goals came from the potent partnership of Tarasconi and new signing Roberto Cherro.

Cherro, who came to the fore at hometown club Sportivo Barracas before moving to Ferro, had to work hard to maintain his playing weight, yet boasted agility and a level of football intelligence that belied his powerful frame. Such was his technical ability, the inside-left was nicknamed *apilador* (dribbler) by Borocotó, the pen name of the leading journalist most known for his writing in the hugely influential Argentine sports magazine *El Gráfico*.

The brightest star of the 1926 season was central-midfielder Mario Fortunato, elected as the league's best player. Sadly, his playing career would be cut short due to a knee injury, with Fortunato hanging up his boots before his 25th birthday. It wouldn't be the end of his journey with Boca.

After eight seasons of division, the two associations merged ahead of the 1927 season. President Alvear assisted in reuniting the two factions, one of the first of many examples of Argentine politicians meddling in football. It was deemed that the national game would be better developed with one single vision and everyone pulling in the same direction.

According to Guillermo Schoua, the fact that Boca's first titles came when many of their rivals were participating in another league in no way waters down the achievement: 'Boca held many records during this time, including the longest unbeaten run and biggest victories, and won various titles. The 1925 tour was the first undertaken by any South American team, including national teams. On the tour the club beat Real Madrid and Atlético, and drew with Bayern Munich. The base of the Argentine national team at this time was made up of Boca players and when the championships were unified the club continued to compete at the top.'

Ahead of the merged 1927 championship, which would feature 34 teams, Boca added Manuel Fleitas Solich, the first Paraguayan to play in Argentina, to the squad. *El Brujo* (The Witch) later became more famous due to his exploits in management where he led Real Madrid and also won three successive league titles with Flamengo in the 1950s, yet in the late 1920s he was a dominant midfielder.

In the 15th round Boca travelled to Lanús, the 2-1 defeat the first *Los Xeneizes* had suffered since March 1924, a run stretching more than three years and 60 matches. Boca bounced back from the disappointment and continued to perform strongly, beating River 1-0 in the last month of the season. Boca ultimately finished one point behind San Lorenzo, proving that the club's recent dominance was no fluke.

The 1928 season provided a real sense of déjà vu for Boca, who once again finished a point behind the champions, this time Huracán. Cherro and Tarasconi were customarily on fire, scoring a combined 61 as Boca racked up a century of goals. A 6-0 home destruction of River, one of the biggest margins in *Superclásico* history, proved symptomatic of the firepower on show, with four goals coming from Cherro's boots alone. Such was Boca's dominance in this particular derby fixture, the match ended early after the River captain had asked the referee for clemency. The home on Calle Brandsen was becoming a veritable fortress and defeat to Talleres in the unlucky 13th round signalled only the first home reverse tasted in 51 games.

A convoluted format awaited the 35 participants of the top flight in 1929, with the teams firstly split into two groups. Boca, minus the departed legend Tesoriere after more than 260 official appearances, and Garasini, winner of five league titles, finished joint top of their group, along with San Lorenzo, who were defeated in a play-off for the right to face Gimnasia in the final. The La Plata outfit were successful and for the third year in succession Boca had to make do with a runners-up spot.

For the first time since the reunification of the organisations Boca won the championship in 1930, finishing five points clear of Estudiantes de La Plata. The almost ever-present duo of Cherro and Tarasconi couldn't be stopped, plundering 64 goals out of Boca's 113 between them. It couldn't be denied that Boca were now Argentina's premier club.

The so-called Roaring Twenties brought unprecedented levels of prosperity to western society, and for Boca Juniors it was no different. The club gleaned six league titles between 1919 and 1930, settled on a location that would be home for at least the following century, and embarked

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on a pioneering tour of Europe. Despite the looming Great Depression, another seismic change was afoot, one that took the club, and Argentine football as a whole, to a whole other stratosphere.